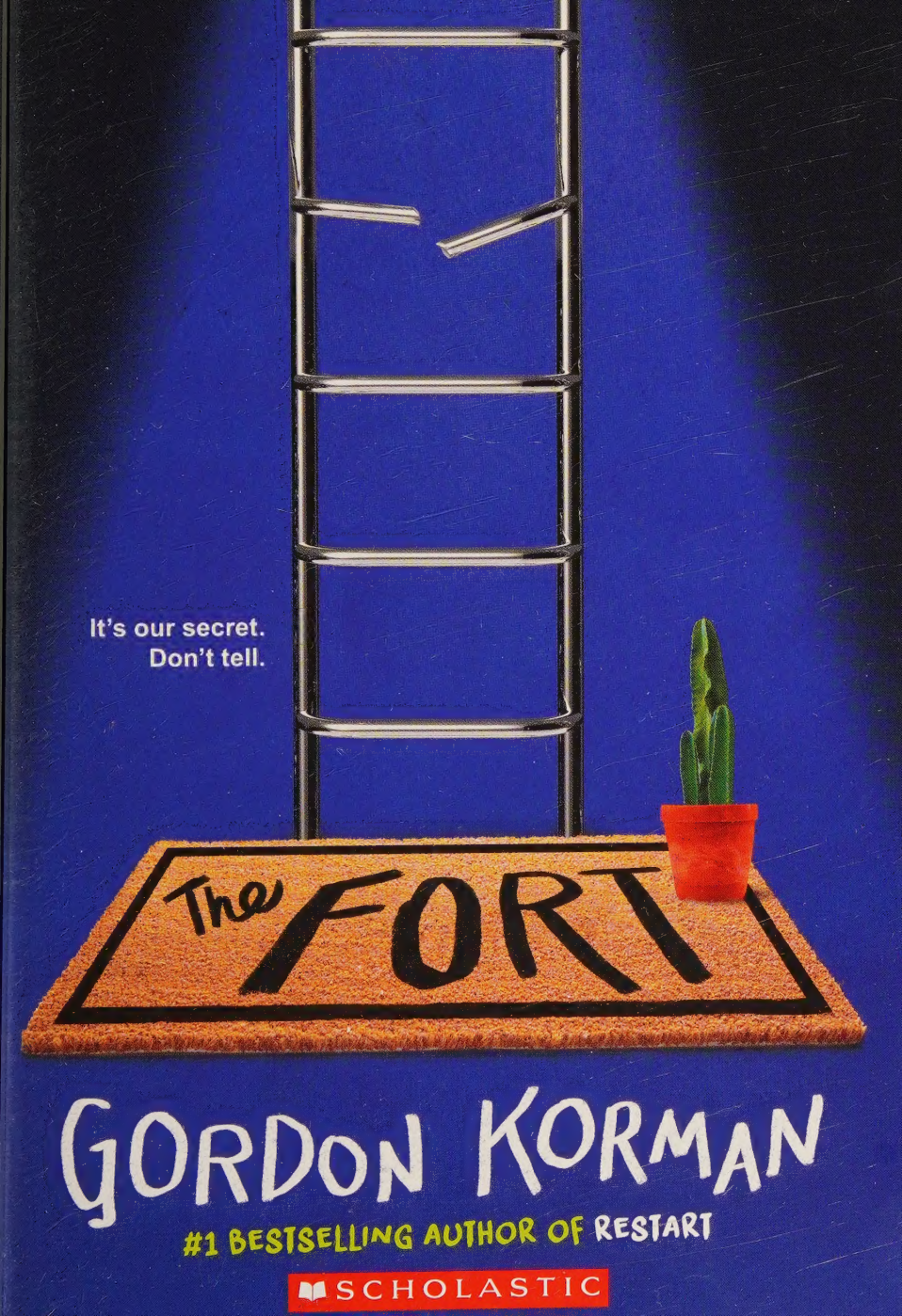
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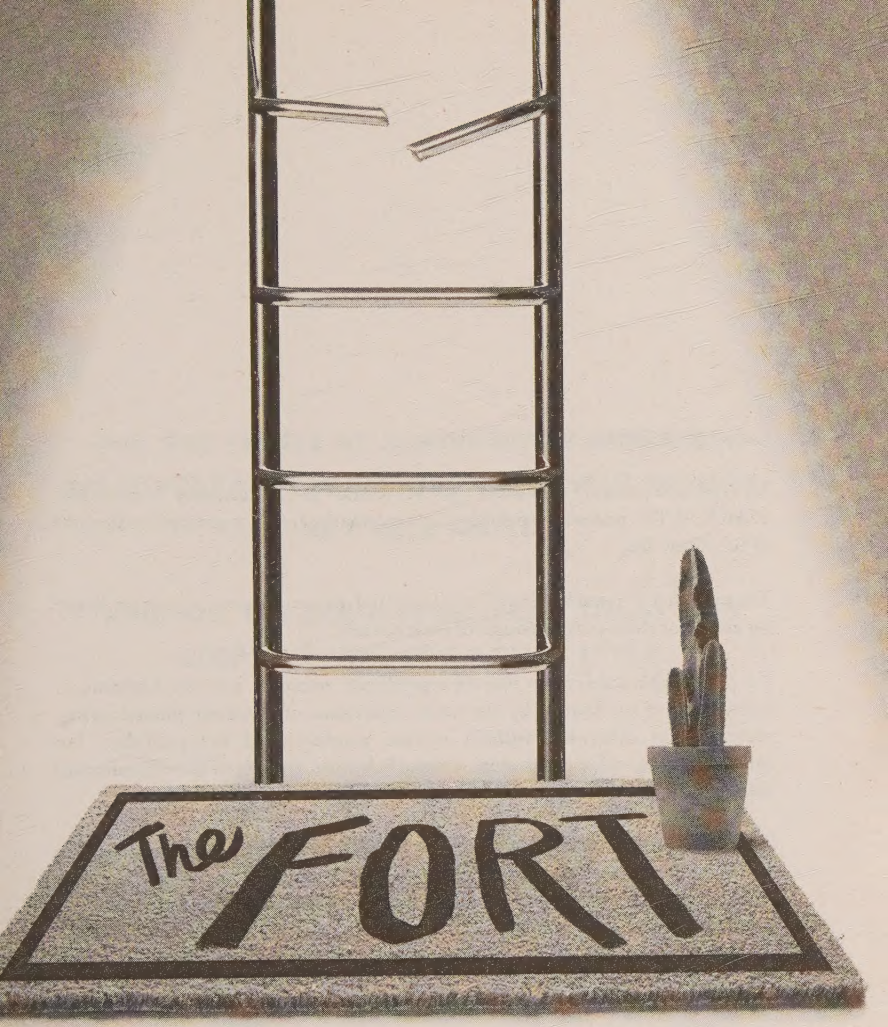

GORDON KORMAN

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FOR THE PEOPLE AT SCHOLASTIC CANADA WHO DISCOVERED A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD WHO THOUGHT HE COULD WRITE,

AND FOR THE SCHOLASTIC GANG TODAY WHO KEEP IT GOING 100 BOOKS LATER.

CHAPTER ONE

EVAN DONNELLY

I get stuck with Ricky the morning after the big storm. A tree branch the size of the Loch Ness Monster blew in through his bedroom window, so his parents need him out of the way while they get everything fixed up.

By the time I haul myself out of bed and struggle into shorts and a T-shirt, Grandma's already feeding him breakfast downstairs in the kitchen. I take a seat on the opposite side of the round table, and she pops a plate in front of me—two pieces of white bread with a little bit of butter.

"Raw toast?" I complain.

"The electricity's out," Grandpa supplies with a swig of orange juice. I catch the bitterness in his tone. No power equals no coffee. "You should see town. Branches in the streets. Mangled lawn furniture all over the place."

"The one in my bedroom took out the whole window frame," Ricky comments. He's short and slight, with huge eyes that always make him seem super serious, whether he is or not. "The carpet's soaked, and there's glass everywhere."

I turn to Grandma. "When can he go home?"

She shoots me a stink eye—a look she normally reserves for

my older brother, Luke. "Mrs. Molina asked this favor of me. We're glad to have Ricky."

Grandma works at the same law firm as Ricky's mom—Grandma as a secretary and Mrs. Molina as a paralegal, whatever that is. The Molinas are new in town, and Grandma is being extra nice to them because she's extra nice to everybody. It's kind of annoying, but I guess I have no right to complain. She took in Luke and me when our parents went into rehab—and kept us when they left it without bothering to come home. That's different, though. We're family.

"I'll probably be here all day," Ricky advises me. "Mom says the glass guys are swamped. Half of Canaan has broken windows."

I take a bite of untoasted toast and chew until it's a tasteless paste in my mouth. The one good thing about having Hurricane Leo lay waste to your town is getting a day off school. I polish off my juice and stand up. "I'm going to track down the guys."

"Good idea," Grandma approves. "You can take Ricky with you."

"He probably wants to hang out with his own friends."

"I don't have any friends," Ricky admits.

"You mean you don't have any friends *yet*," I amend. "Don't worry—you'll make some. A day like today is the perfect chance to . . ." I wilt under Grandma's red-hot gaze. "Fine. Tell me what I have to do and I'll do it."

"You *know* what you have to do," she replies, her eyes speaking paragraphs.

Grandpa is oozing sympathy in my direction. He can relate. He's been married to Grandma for over forty years. That's a lot of time to be stationed under the supreme commander.

When I step out of the house, it's with Ricky Molina by my side. Lucky me.

Grandpa wasn't exaggerating about the state of the town. The streets are an obstacle course of downed branches and shingles that blew off roofs. Debris is everywhere, and power crews move from pole to pole, patching and replacing. On our block alone, three big trees have been completely uprooted from the soggy ground, flipping whole slabs of concrete from the sidewalk and curb.

The entire side of Grandma and Grandpa's house is purple from a bombardment of wind-borne blueberries. You can actually smell the crushed fruit like somebody's got a pie in the oven.

Ricky wrinkles his nose. "Disgusting."

I swear I was just about to say the same thing. But hearing it from Ricky makes me offended on behalf of my grandparents' home and blueberries, which are now my favorite fruit.

"It could have been worse," I tell him. "We could have been pinned to our beds when a giant branch came through the window."

He shrugs. "It didn't hit me. I just got some cuts from the broken glass."

I should say I've got nothing against Ricky. He's not even a total stranger. He's in some of my classes at school, although I think he's a little younger than me—not sure how that works. But in a town like Canaan, you've known your boys since preschool. That's a lot of history compared to some random kid who shows up the first week of eighth grade. I'm sure he'll make friends eventually. I'm just not going to be one of them.

I lead him along Peacock Avenue as we pick our way around the branches and debris on the sidewalk. Some of the stuff we step over is pretty amazing—a weather vane, a smashed skylight, a baby swing, the rusty grill of a barbecue. I reach down and pick up the top half of a two-piece bathing suit, then ask, "How did this get here?"

Ricky shrugs. "Somebody hung out their laundry, and it blew away. I'll bet the bottom half is on its way to Bermuda."

"More like Canada," I muse, picturing the TV news projection of the path of Hurricane Leo.

Mitchell Worth and C.J. Sciutto are waiting at our meeting place by the trail that leads into the woods. Wiry, dark-haired C.J. is narrating the play-by-play of his latest "death-defier"—a skateboard drag down the railing at the front steps of the Canaan Public Library.

". . . I'm sliding along, wind blowing through my hair, when this little old lady grabs hold of the banister like it's a tug-of-war and starts up the stairs. Well, I can't just plow her down, right? So I jump her and I nail it—*almost*." When he's telling a story, his mouth moves a mile a minute.

Blond Mitchell examines the scabby scrape on the whole

right side of C.J.'s face. "Did it hurt?" He wants more details. Mitchell always wants more details, especially when they're gory.

"No, it didn't hurt," C.J. snaps sarcastically. "It felt like landing on a feather bed." He turns to me, his brow furrowing as he takes in my companion. "What's with him?"

"You guys know Ricky from school," I explain. "His mom works with my grandma."

"Yeah, but what's he doing *here*?" Mitchell probes. He's staring at Ricky like the kid's in a specimen jar or something. Mitchell has obsessive-compulsive disorder—OCD for short. It hits different people in different ways. In Mitchell's case, it means he doesn't like unexpected twists. Among other things.

"Am I late?"

The voice is distant, but it booms like thunder. Tall, athletic Jason Brax rides up, bent over the handlebars of his silver racing bike. "Sorry! I'm with my dad this week. I had to help him mop out the kitchen. We left the window open last night because we burned the chili. The smoke went out, but the hurricane came in!" Everything about Jason is larger than life: His voice; his mane of windblown brown hair. Even his shoulders are broader and more adult-size than the rest of ours.

He falls silent when he sees Ricky standing with us.

"The hurricane came into my house too," Ricky supplies. "A big branch blew through my bedroom window."

"Ricky's with me," I confess. "You know, while his folks get his room fixed up."

"But, Evan," Jason protests, "we're going to—you know it's supposed to be a secret, right?"

"I can keep a secret," Ricky promises.

"You can't keep it, because it isn't your secret," Mitchell puts in with his usual flawless logic.

I sigh. "I have a feeling our secret is blown all over the woods. Just look around you. The whole town is a disaster area. Imagine what the storm did to a few tarps."

"Maybe the trees protected it," Jason suggests hopefully.

"Protected what?" Ricky probes.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Mitchell shoots back.

Not that I'm the world's greatest Ricky protector, but this is working itself up to be a giant fight over nothing. "We built a fort in the woods—"

"A *secret* fort," Mitchell interjects, his voice urgent, like he can stop me now.

"So that's where we're going," I finish. "To check on it and see if it's still standing."

"It won't be," C.J. predicts mournfully.

"Only one way to find out," decides Ricky. "Let's go see."

The chorus of protest is drowned out by the roar of an unmuffled car engine. Louder yet is the pounding bass coming from the beat-up convertible's sound system. The fire-engine-red Mustang comes barreling down the street, swerves to avoid a fallen TV satellite dish, and screeches to a halt in front of us.

"Morning, losers," my brother, Luke, greets us from the passenger seat.

A couple of the guys say hi to Luke, but nobody acknowledges the driver of the car, my brother's new best friend, Jaeger Devlin.

"Gentlemen," Jaeger greets us in his oily way, his smile oozing fake charm.

Nobody answers except Ricky, who gives him a shy "Hey."

Ricky's new in town, so he probably hasn't heard about Jaeger yet. The guy should come with warning labels about how he's hazardous to your health. I wish my brother would stay away from him, but there's no way I can say that to Luke. We used to be close. What choice did we have? When our parents went off the rails and our family fell apart, all we had was each other. But ever since Jaeger's been in the picture, Luke's been a straight-up jerk. I haven't liked being around him much lately. Scariest of all is the look in his eyes—a little bit crazy, a little bit hunted, yet also absent and disconnected, like nobody's home. Our parents looked like that just before they spiraled out of control and left us. If that's starting to happen to Luke, I don't know if I'm going to be able to handle it. That's why I hate Jaeger—reason number seventeen. There are all kinds of reasons to hate Jaeger.

"What's in the woods?" Jaeger asks us.

"N-nothing!" Mitchell stammers. "Why would you think we're going in the woods?"

Without changing his bland expression to indicate any interest whatsoever, Jaeger inclines his head to indicate Ricky, who's a few yards past us, clearly starting along the trail.

"I want to see the uprooted trees," Ricky replies smoothly. "It's got to be crazy in there. So many tangled root systems."

Luke makes a face. "Sounds boring. Plenty of damage around town. That's what we're checking out."

Translation: They're poking around blown-in doors, missing windows, and broken locks, looking for things to steal. Jaeger's all about the five-finger discount. And lately, everything Jaeger does is just great with my brother.

"Later, gentlemen." Jaeger throws the Mustang in gear and lurches forward ten feet so his twin tailpipes are pointing at us. Then he revs the engine, spewing a cloud of thick gray exhaust that leaves us all choking. Finally, they screech off down the road.

I get a sympathetic look from the recognizable half of C.J.'s swollen face. "Dude, I know he's your brother. But what a jerk!"

"Yeah," Mitchell adds, brushing at his shirt as if he can wipe the smoke off. "What are you going to do about him?"

"Let's just find our fort," I mumble, starting along the trail after Ricky. I know from hard experience that there's nothing you can do when someone you're close to messes up big.

Luke knows too. He was right there with me, watching it happen.

CHAPTER TWO

MITCHELL WORTH

It's no fair that Ricky gets to come to our fort, which is supposed to be secret but isn't anymore, because Ricky knows about it.

And I'm not the only one who thinks it isn't right that we have to bring a tagalong to our place.

"You know, I asked you guys about twenty times if I could tell Janelle about the fort, and you said no," Jason reminds everybody as we make our way through the woods along the trail. "So how's it okay for this guy? No offense, Ricky."

Evan, who's the second tallest of us, after Jason, ducks under a broken branch that's hanging low. "Fort rules. Guys only."

"There are no 'fort rules'!" Jason complains. "We just finished the thing, like, three days ago!"

"Who's Janelle?" Ricky asks.

"Romeo's got a girlfriend," C.J. explains.

Ricky frowns. "I don't think I know her. Does she go to our school?"

Jason reddens a little. "She's in the seventh grade. Which is *fine*!" he adds, his loud voice booming even louder. "Girls mature faster than guys do."

"I'm technically in seventh grade too," Ricky admits. "They bumped me up to eighth when I moved to Canaan because I went to a special magnet school for the gifted where we used to live."

"You *skipped*?" I'm outraged, my tone rising to a high note. "You mean you just get to jump an entire year of school like it doesn't even exist?"

C.J. tries to put an arm around my shoulder. "Take it easy, man—"

I shrug away from him. There's no such thing as taking it easy when the subject is school, the central torture of my life. "I have to suffer and this new guy pops up out of nowhere, and he gets a get-out-of-jail-free card on a whole grade?"

"Only because Canaan Middle is a regular school," Ricky reasons. "There's another magnet school over in Freeport. If I get in, I'll have to drop down to seventh grade again."

Everybody stops walking, and you can feel the mood change in the woods. It's like Ricky just called our school dumb—which means we must be dumb for going there. Calling people dumb is dumb.

"Not cool, man," C.J. scolds Ricky. "You don't have to rub it in our faces. It's not our fault your parents moved you from Magnetville to Stupid Town."

"I didn't say that!" Ricky defends himself. "I went to a magnet school. I'm applying to another one. Is that a crime?"

Well, if it isn't, it should be. I can't believe Evan's grandmother is making us hang out with this magnet-headed creep.

Then again, Evan's grandmother is the scariest person I've ever met—next to Jaeger, I mean.

We start walking again, and nobody kills Ricky. I guess that means he's forgiven for being a little snot—by the others (not me). As we hike deeper into the woods, I make sure to brush my elbow against the bark of every seventh tree, because seven is my lucky number. None of the other guys do that kind of stuff—it's an OCD thing. Dr. Breckinridge says it's my way of controlling part of my life to make up for the fact that I can't control the important things—like how my brain works, or Mom getting laid off from her job at the DelaCraft Auto Parts factory. I can't change the fact that now she has to work three jobs instead of one, so I get obsessed with the things I *do* have power over—like which trees I elbow, and what song to hum while I'm doing it. That's assuming Dr. Breckinridge knows what he's talking about, which he probably doesn't. I don't go to him anymore. Not because Dr. Breckinridge is a bad psychiatrist, but because Mom lost her health insurance when she lost her factory job, so we can't afford it now.

I think it's pretty rotten of Dr. Breckinridge to drop me like a hot potato, but Mom says nobody should have to do work without getting paid. So I guess I'm stuck with my problems. No big whoop. At this point, OCD doesn't feel like a disorder; it just feels like *me*. But still, I hate hating school so much, because what kid has any choice about spending half his life there? I was just working my way out of that when I got dumped. I heard that sometimes old Russian space capsules fall

out of orbit and hit things on the ground. I hope one of them falls on Dr. Breckinridge's herb garden, which he loves so much.

Five, six, seven—*bop*!

Anyway, Dr. Breckinridge didn't even get the control part right. The farther we get into the woods, the more storm damage we see. So what am I supposed to do with the trees that are bent over by wind, or knocked down completely? Do I include those or not, huh? It's important because if I get one wrong, the whole count is off.

I hit the next trunk too hard and scrape my elbow. It doesn't hurt that much, but now I can't concentrate because I'm worrying that I might need a tetanus shot. I can't dial 9-1-1, since my phone's busted and we can't afford to get it fixed. I'm sure one of the guys would let me use his. Except Ricky. I wouldn't use his phone anyway. I'd rather die of tetanus. (I have no idea what tetanus actually is, but it sounds scary.)

"We're here," Evan says, and everybody stops.

Ricky looks around. "I don't see any fort."

Evan indicates the stump of an ancient maple tree. The bark is gone, and the dead wood inside is being hollowed out by an army of termites. "From this spot, we hang a left and march twenty-six paces off the main path."

That annoys me. "How many times do I have to tell you? It can be twenty-five or twenty-seven, but never twenty-six!"

Ricky is mystified. "What's wrong with twenty-six?"

I'm disgusted. "Didn't they teach you anything in magnet school? Twenty-six is two times thirteen! That's the unluckiest number!"

He stares at me. "You have triskaidekaphobia!"

"I do not! I have OCD!"

"Triskaidekaphobia means you're afraid of the number thirteen," he persists.

"I'm not afraid of it," I retort. "I respect it, because I know it can kill me."

"How about this?" C.J. suggests. "I'll walk twenty-five paces, Evan'll walk twenty-seven, and the fort should be halfway between us."

"Pretending doesn't work," I grumble. "We all know it's twenty-six, so it's still bad."

We leave the path and push through the underbrush. I'm trying so hard not to count steps that I'm practically tap dancing. The other guys are used to me, but not Ricky. He's looking at me like I'm a clown. I'm not, you know. A lot of people have OCD—adults too, not just kids. Maybe that Russian space capsule will bounce off Dr. Breckinridge's herb garden and land on Ricky.

Not counting is almost impossible for a guy like me. In fact, I'm almost up to a hundred and fifty when Jason groans, *"Ohhhhhh!"*

"Our fort!" adds Evan in true pain.

The location was a perfect, U-shaped recess in the rock, big enough for all four of us. We made the roof out of old shower curtains from C.J.'s house—a little moldy, but totally waterproof. We attached them to the rock with railroad spikes and tied the front to two skinny trees that were almost like matching pillars for our grand entrance. The walls were formed by a

piece of plywood on the left and an old NO TRESPASSING sign on the right.

At least that's what it *used* to look like. It doesn't look like that anymore. It doesn't look like much of anything. The rock formation is still there. The stones we brought in as seats have sunk into the mud from all that rain. The walls and roof are gone, blown away by the wind. A few pieces of the NO TRESPASSING sign—each about the size of a postage stamp—are scattered at the base of a nearby elm tree. Strips of tattered shower curtain flutter from branches thirty feet up.

That's all that's left of our fort.

"I warned you guys," I tell them resentfully. "Twenty-six paces is asking for trouble. And now our fort is in the toilet."

Jason shrugs. "We can rebuild it. You know, bring in a couple more shower curtains—"

C.J. shakes his head. "No good. Mom and Marcus switched to glass doors when we redid the bathroom."

Evan sighs. "What's the point? It'll just blow away with the next storm."

"Or get crushed by a Russian space capsule," I can't help adding. Once I get hooked on a subject, it's very hard to put it out of my mind.

"Forget it," C.J. decides. "This is an ex-fort."

"Hey!" comes Ricky's voice. "Check this out!"

In all the agony about our fort being destroyed by the storm, none of us noticed Ricky drift away. That's because it isn't his agony, because it isn't his fort. Face it—it isn't anybody's fort anymore. Right now, our unwanted guest is about

twenty feet behind us, in what probably used to be a clearing but is now covered in underbrush. He's hacking at the ground with the heel of his sneaker. Then he drops to his knees and starts digging with his hands. What a weird kid!

Evan is the first one over there. "Will you cut it out, Ricky? If you come back covered in mud, my grandma's going to blame *me*!" He glances down at the place where Ricky's digging and squats right next to him. Suddenly, the two of them are scrabbling in the dirt together.

"Get over here, you guys!" Evan calls. "He's found something!"

I've completely lost my count, so I have no idea if this is good luck or bad.

CHAPTER THREE

RICKY MOLINA

Evan and I dig like crazy, clearing the mud and weeds away from the hard surface underneath.

Jason leans over and brays "What is it?" directly into my ear. The guy has no volume control. Everything comes out at eleven.

I knock on it with my fist. "It's definitely metal. Feels like a big square plate. The runoff from the storm must have uncovered it."

"Big deal," yawns C.J., the one with the messed-up face. "Somebody threw away a piece of metal. Whoop-de-do."

I keep on digging. I'm not sure why I'm being so stubborn. Maybe it's this: Evan and his buddies have made it pretty clear that I'm about as welcome in this group as a bad stomach flu. And if this metal plate turns out to be something interesting—or even valuable—then those guys won't be able to make me feel so useless. Okay, it's probably just junk, but what if it isn't? What if it's the top of a metal box with something cool inside? Like a time capsule. Or a secret grave. For all we know, it could be a million dollars cash from some long-forgotten bank heist!

Evan is working as hard as I am, and so is that Mitchell kid—although he's digging from a distance with a long branch.

"What's this?" Evan asks. There's a slot in the metal near the edge of the plate.

All at once, it comes to me—like one of those optical puzzles where you have to see the hidden image. The slot—a *handle*!

I stand up, fix the fingers of both hands into it, and heave with all my might. For the first couple of seconds, it won't budge. Then, with a crunching sound, the earth and stones around the edges break away, and the trapdoor rises up on its rusty hinges with a creaking sound.

"No way!" Jason booms.

All five of us gather around, gawking into the hole.

There's something there—an underground chamber. A metal ladder, bolted to the wall, descends into the darkness. I pull out my phone and turn on the flashlight app. The ladder stretches about twelve feet straight down to a metal floor, and—

"Is that a welcome mat?" Evan breathes, squinting into the gloom.

"Someone *lives* here?" Jason asks in amazement.

"I don't think so," I answer. "At least not anymore. I'm pretty sure the trapdoor was covered by dirt before the hurricane washed it away. Only one way to find out." I swing a leg over the side and step down to the first rung.

"Maybe this isn't such a great idea," Mitchell says nervously. "There could be wild animals living down there."

"With a welcome mat?" C.J. challenges.

"I'm going too," Evan decides. "If anything eats Ricky, I'm

better off facing it than trying to explain to my grandmother that I lost him."

I step carefully at first, but the ladder seems sturdy. Holding my phone light in my teeth, I clamber down until I'm standing on the welcome mat. Evan scrambles after me and we stand opposite each other, frozen in time and a little bit scared.

"Hello?" I sound like a first grader.

"Anybody get eaten yet?" Mitchell calls from above. His voice seems distant.

I brandish my phone so I can light our way. Before I can look around, Evan yanks down a heavy metal toggle switch on the wall. There's a loud click and the whole place lights up like it's high noon. I close my eyes from the sudden brightness, and when I open them again, I'm in another world.

There's a whole house down here—or at least a whole apartment! It must be almost thirty feet long, clad in metal, lit by bulbs in the ceiling. There's a full kitchen, complete with a sink and running water, and, in a small alcove behind it, a chemical toilet.

There's a living area, with a futon couch, and even one of those bulky old-fashioned TV sets with a squarish screen, rounded at the corners. The floor is decorated with a rug—a little dusty, but fancy, probably expensive—Persian or Chinese. Not that I'm an expert, but some of the families from my old school owned a lot of pricey, high-end stuff. It's not hard to recognize that kind of thing once you've seen it a few times.

"Are you guys okay?" we hear C.J.'s voice call from the surface. "Where's all that bright light coming from?"

"Come on down," Evan invites him. "You're not going to believe it."

Jason climbs down and stands, blinking and staring. "Whoa, what is this place?' he hollers, and the echo reverberates off the metal walls. The guy is loud enough in the regular world. Down here, he's a human bullhorn.

C.J. is next, followed eventually by a reluctant Mitchell, who looks like he's expecting at least a Bengal tiger to leap out of the chemical toilet and swallow us whole.

"Okay, I don't get it," C.J. admits. "If nobody lives in this place, why is it here? Who builds an underground house in the middle of the woods? Who builds *any* kind of house if they're not going to live in it?"

"This is bigger than my dad's apartment," Jason puts in. He opens a kitchen cabinet to reveal a stack of elegant china plates and a row of crystal glasses. "Nicer too. Except the TV. That's a piece of junk."

I'm forming an opinion about that. "I don't think it's junk. I think it's just old—all TVs were like that before flat-screens were invented. See that machine on the shelf underneath it? That's a player for videocassettes—like they used to have in the seventies and eighties."

"My grandparents have one," Evan confirms. "It's in a box in the basement, but Grandpa won't throw it out. I guess it cost a lot when he bought it."

"Don't you get it?" I persist. "Expensive plates, expensive glasses, expensive rugs, expensive stuff from a long time ago. This place used to belong to some rich guy—someone who

could afford to have it built, and hooked up to electricity, and filled with all the comforts of home. And the reason it's abandoned is because he's probably dead."

Mitchell shudders. "I don't want to be in some dead guy's house. It could be haunted."

"Not unless he died *in* it," C.J. points out. "Do you see any old bones around here?"

Evan is kneeling in front of the TV. "I wonder if this thing works. Where's the remote?"

"There isn't one. Everything was buttons back then." I join him and try to press the on button, which turns out to be a switch you have to twist. There's a click, and the screen lightens a little, but there's nothing on it.

"Figures," Mitchell puts in. "It's broken."

I turn the channel dial, clicking past one through twelve. Nothing. That's when I notice the light on the videocassette player. "There's a tape in here!" I exclaim, and hit play.

Finally, we get something on the screen. First, a procession of upside-down numbers, followed by a weird line of distortion that starts at the bottom of the screen and slowly climbs all the way to the top.

"This is a really boring show," C.J. announces with a smirk that makes the injured side of his face look grotesque.

And suddenly, we see—

"A guy!" Jason bellows, rattling the metal walls.

The man on the screen is probably in his sixties, with white hair and steel-rimmed glasses. He wears a fancy three-piece suit and sits at a carved desk in what looks like a posh office,

with lots of dark woods, red leathers, and gleaming glassed-in bookcases.

"There's our rich dude," Evan supplies.

He starts to speak, but there isn't any sound. I scramble to twist the volume knob, and a commanding voice comes from the small speaker—this is a person who's used to being in charge.

". . . so if you're watching this, I have to conclude that I'm dead, and America is under attack. I won't apologize for the fact that I can't speak Russian or Chinese, or the language of whoever is in charge here. I'm sure your translators will figure it out soon enough."

"Who is that old guy?" Jason asks in confusion. "He looks kind of familiar."

C.J. snaps his fingers. "You know what? I think that's Bennett Delamere."

The name means nothing to me. "Who's Bennett Delamere?"

Evan provides the answer. "Founder of DelaCraft Auto Parts. Half the town works there. Or at least they did till the layoffs started."

"Including my mom," Mitchell adds mournfully.

"*Is* he dead?" I ask.

"I'm pretty sure he died a long time ago," Evan replies. "But I don't think that's what he's talking about here. What's all this stuff about America being under attack? And speaking Russian and Chinese?"

The facts are starting to come together in my head. A mysterious underground hideaway. Bizarre talk about an

invasion and speaking Russian or Chinese. An old-fashioned videocassette playing on technology from the seventies or eighties—

"I know what this place is!" I blurt. "It's a bomb shelter from the Cold War!"

"What's a cold war?" Mitchell asks. "I mean, besides when my mom turns down the thermostat to save money on our heating bill?"

"I remember it from social studies," C.J. interjects. "The Cold War was that time when the Americans, Russians, and Chinese were all afraid we were going to nuke each other!"

"Right!" I agree. "And a lot of people built underground bunkers like this one so they could survive a nuclear war!" I point to the screen, where Bennett Delamere is threatening the "invaders" that America will rise again. "It would explain this weird message."

"It makes sense, you know," Evan muses thoughtfully. "Everybody says Bennett Delamere was kind of eccentric. And a rich guy like him would have plenty of money to carve a place like this in the middle of the woods and deck it out like a vacation house."

I step over to the kitchen and begin opening cabinets and drawers. The largest unit turns out to be a pantry that is jammed full of canned food, stacked floor to ceiling. There are soups and stews, beans and vegetables, whole meals in tins and in freeze-dried packages. "See?" I announce. "This is enough food for someone to shelter for months."

"People who live in underground bunkers shouldn't eat

beans," C.J. comments in that deadpan voice of his. "It's the musical fruit, you know."

I sniff the air. "It's actually pretty fresh down here. There must be some kind of circulation fan somewhere. This Delamere guy might have been kind of a wing nut, but he sure knew how to build a bomb shelter."

"He was a jerk," Mitchell says bitterly. "According to my mom, Canaan used to be the best town in the state until DelaCraft Auto Parts started laying people off."

On the TV, Bennett Delamere finishes off with "You may have killed me, but there are plenty more red-blooded Americans to pick up the torch of freedom and drive you from our shores. God bless America!" The screen goes dark, and there's a whirring sound for a few seconds, before the video begins all over again, upside-down numbers first.

Evan leans over and hits pause before the tape can restart. The image of Bennett Delamere freezes, his index finger at full wag, his mouth open in mid-word.

"What a chump," C.J. comments. "He spent all this money to protect himself against a bomb that never fell and a war that never came."

"Money doesn't care who owns it," Jason agrees. "I'd give anything to have a place like this."

"Actually," I say slowly, "you *do* have a place like this. *This* place."

"Get a grip, Ricky," Jason sneers. "Like Bennett Delamere would give it to *us*."

"Bennett Delamere is dead," I remind them. "He doesn't

need it anymore. And nobody else knows about it. At least I doubt it. If it wasn't for the hurricane, that trapdoor would have stayed buried forever. Guys—twenty minutes ago, you were all moaning and groaning because the storm blew away that collection of shower curtains and keep-out signs you called a fort. Don't you see that we've just found the greatest ready-made fort in the history of the world?"

They stand there, staring at me like I'm speaking Norwegian.

Mitchell is the first to find his voice. "I know what you're up to. You're ticked off because you weren't a part of the old fort, so now you're trying to weasel in on the new one!"

"Mitchell," C.J. chides gently. "He has a right to be part of this fort. He found it, remember?"

"Okay." Evan is all business. "If this is going to be our fort, we have to lay down a few ground rules—"

"*Under*ground rules," Mitchell amends.

"Rule number one: *Total* secrecy. Nobody except the five of us is allowed to know about this place. If any parents get wind of it, they'll start asking questions about whether or not it's safe, and before you know it, they'll shut us down. And no other kids either, because they might tell *their* parents."

Jason speaks up. "But obviously, I have to tell Janelle."

An angry babble from the others shouts him down.

"Janelle is the last person you can tell," Evan informs him sternly. "Her dad's a cop, and we can't let the authorities find out about this place. We don't own it, you know."

"Yeah, but Bennett Delamere is dead," Jason argues. "And I remember hearing that he never got married or had any kids."

"Still," I reason, "there must be some nephew or cousin who inherited his millions. That would be the owner of this place—even if that person doesn't know it."

"Let's keep it that way," Evan adds, "by making sure Janelle never has a chance to mention it to dear old Dad."

Jason doesn't look happy. "Janelle says honesty is the most important thing in a relationship."

"You won't be lying," I assure him. "You'll just be leaving a couple of details out."

"Besides," Mitchell says, "the old fort was guys only. So that rule automatically transfers to here."

"What rule?" Jason complains, his booming voice resonating. "The old fort only existed for, like, six hours before the hurricane wrecked it! We never even got to hang out there!"

C.J. puts his hands over his ears. "If we're going to be spending a lot of time down here, *no yelling* is going to have to be rule two."

Jason glares at him. "How come all the rules have to be about me, huh? Why don't we have a rule about not scraping half your face off? Or no—what's the thing about the thirteens? Tris—triska—"

"Triskaidekaphobia," I supply.

"Or no bringing some stranger along and blaming it on your grandmother?" he presses on with a scowl at Evan. "How about rules like that?"

I take a breath and survey the four of them. "Okay—I'm the new guy and you've been friends forever. I get that. But think about how *lucky* we are! We've got a great place we can come to whenever we want. Chances are the one other guy who knew about it died a long time ago, so it's one hundred percent ours. What are the odds that we'd just stumble on it like we did? But it's not going to be any good if we can't stop fighting over it."

Evan nods. "Ricky's right."

There's a long pause as the others try to dream up a reason why I'm wrong. I must be wrong, because I'm the outsider. Of all the towns for my folks to have to move to, why Canaan, huh? It's always hard to be new, especially when you're the youngest. But why are these guys so dead set on being jerks? If one of them had found the trapdoor, they'd shut me out in a heartbeat. Even Evan—okay, he's defending me now, but this morning, he made it pretty clear that he'd rather stuff me down a sewer than bring me along to hang out with his friends.

Eventually, though, they all nod, even Mitchell.

Evan finds a pad of paper and a stubby pencil in a kitchen drawer and writes:

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, PROMISE TO KEEP OUR FORT A SECRET UNTIL THE VERY LAST ONE OF US IS AS DEAD AS BENNETT DELAMERE.

We sign our names in a circle. "That way, we're all equal," I explain, "because nobody comes first."

Then we shut off the power and climb the ladder to the surface. With all the storm damage, it's an easy job to find enough fallen branches to cover the trapdoor. The fort lay hidden for over forty years. It would be a shame to have someone else discover it right after we've claimed it as our own.

It's as we're retracing our steps out of the woods that the text comes to my phone. My window has been fixed and the branch is officially out of my bedroom. I can go home anytime.

"Awesome!" Evan exclaims far too enthusiastically when I give him the news. It's pretty plain that he can't get rid of me soon enough.

Funny—I should be twice as happy as Evan. The last thing I need to do is hang around where I'm not wanted.

But everything has changed somehow. I started the day as the unwelcome new kid from a magnet school.

Now I'm twenty percent owner of a fort.

CHAPTER FOUR

C.J. SCIUTTO

I hate the mirror in our upstairs bathroom. It's an okay mirror and all that—it isn't cracked or cursed so you have to look into the spirit world or the dark side of the Force. But it's the place where I always go to assess the damage.

Wouldn't you know it? The scrape on the right side of my face hasn't completely gone away yet, and already there's a big swollen bruise on my forehead. Orange and black, very colorful. It hurts like crazy, but that's not my biggest problem. The hard part is going to be designing the perfect stunt to cover up how it happened.

The guys are used to me banging myself up with my "death-defiers," but this bruise is a tricky one. It's pretty high up on my forehead, so I can't say I fell on my face or rollerbladed into a door, since that wouldn't be the right spot. It's almost like I was walking under a balcony and got hit with a falling flowerpot, but nobody's going to believe that. A bike jump, maybe—I could have gone over the handlebars and landed on my head. That's more like it. Not exactly easy, but I can make it work. I have a lot of experience.

Trust me, that's not a good thing.

My stepfather, Marcus, is in the kitchen, making himself a

sandwich as I come down the stairs. "Want something to eat?" he calls.

"I'm not hungry."

Marcus is built like a grizzly bear after a growth spurt, with a temper to match. He used to be on the semiprofessional wrestling circuit after he graduated college. He tells great stories about that time. My friends all think I'm weird because I'm not his biggest fan. To them, Marcus is the coolest, nicest guy in the world. And he is—ninety percent of the time.

It's the other ten percent you have to worry about.

That ten percent comes out and then, in the blink of an eye, he's all sweetness and light again, ready to do anything to make you love him.

Like now. "Your mom wants to go to the mall later," he says. "I was thinking we could pick up that new *Call of Duty* game everyone's talking about."

"I'm busy," I mumble.

"Oh, well, I'll get it for you. They say it's the best one of the series."

"Thanks." I nearly choke on the word.

In the garage I grab my bike, a small board, and a concrete cinder block. Daredevil C.J.—I've always got a ramp available just in case I have to break my neck on short notice. I set it up at the bottom of the hill, so I'll really be flying when I hit the jump. I make sure to angle the ramp so that I land on grass rather than pavement. I may be a daredevil, but there's a limit to the daring part.

The bike is a pretty expensive one—another gift from Marcus. I didn't want it, but he bought it for me anyway.

I never want anything from him.

I power down the hill and hit the ramp at full speed. Crashing is easy—I just have to "forget" to pull the front of the bike up when I'm in midair. My front tire comes down first, catapulting me across the lawn. At the last second, my instinct for survival kicks in, and I tuck into a somersault and land perfectly. *Too* perfectly. No injury.

Way to go, genius. Now you have to do it again.

On the second try, I resist the somersault and come down right on my head. I can actually feel my forehead plowing through the turf like a bulldozer. Nailed it.

Shakily, I get back to my feet in a shower of earth and grass, and pick up my bike, which landed a few feet away.

"Are you okay?" Bike tires leave treads on the pavement as Jason skids up, jamming on his brakes. "Dude—what did you do that for?"

I shrug. "Who knows why I do what I do? It's my latest death-defier."

"Yeah, but you're going to get yourself killed!"

"That's the death part," I explain. "And when I survive, it means I defied it." A drop of blood trickles into my eye, which makes it sting. *"Almost."*

He examines me critically. "Look at your head! It's black and orange and green—"

"That must be grass," I put in.

His foghorn voice is at full volume. "And it's all swollen! Why's it swelling so fast?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

He won't let it go. "You're going to need first aid for that. Are you okay to bike home?"

"I'm not going home."

He's getting frantic. "You're bleeding. You need to wash that out. Put antiseptic on it and at least a Band-Aid."

"I think we're out of all that stuff," I tell him, because I can't say that more one-on-one time with Marcus is the last thing I need.

"Yeah, but where else is there to go?"

Come to think of it, there is *one* place . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

JASON BRAX

Janelle says I think about divorce way too much for someone in a serious relationship.

She's probably right about that—and even if she isn't, I tell her she is. That's the difference between a serious relationship and just a regular one. In a serious relationship, you want the other person to feel good about herself.

On the other hand, how can I not think about divorce all the time? My parents are in the middle of the divorce of the century, with me right in the middle. They really don't like each other, and the only weapon each one has against the other is yours truly. A few weeks ago, a tearful Mom recorded me on her phone promising to spend time with her after the split gets finalized. Guess what: She used that recording to request more money in the settlement because she has a son to support. I got a real warm welcome at Dad's place after that news got out.

The worst part is I have to alternate weeks between two homes—Mom's house, where we all used to live, and Dad's new apartment, which is almost three miles out of town. During Dad weeks, riding my bike to school on early mornings is brutal. I've got one of those clear plastic rain ponchos for bad weather. It works about zero percent. The tire treads kick

water from the road straight up under the poncho. By the time I arrive at school, I look like I wet my pants. I usually wear my gym shorts those days. That's how Janelle first noticed me. The seventh-grade girls used to call me Gym Shorts Guy.

When soccer practice runs late on a Dad week, it's usually pitch-dark outside by the time I manage to pedal all the way back to the apartment. I asked Dad if it's okay for me to bunk with Mom those few extra nights.

He bought me a light for my bike. He said, "If I give in on even one tiny thing, she'll take me to the cleaners everywhere else."

True. Mom and Dad are divvying up every single piece of property except one. They are the co-owners of a Ping-Pong ball named Jason.

It isn't one hundred percent bad. All that bike time has given me killer stamina on the soccer field. And if I didn't have to ride those three miles every time I want to see Janelle, I wouldn't have been there to save C.J.'s life today.

"You're not saving my life," he says irritably. "I'm fine."

This from a guy with half his face scraped off and the other half split open.

We're on our way to the fort, which is the only place C.J. will go. Leaving his "jump ramp" by the side of the road, we ride to the woods, stash our bikes in the trees, and set out along the trail. As we walk, I call Evan and tell him to meet us at the fort with antiseptic and bandages. "Better bring an ice pack too. He's swelling so fast it looks like he's growing a second head on top of the first."

"Another death-defier?" Evan asks on the other end of the line.

"Almost," I reply, using C.J.'s favorite word. "As in this time he almost didn't defy it!"

"Keep it down," C.J. hisses at me. "*Some* of us have a headache!"

We make our way to the termite stump, then turn left for the famous twenty-six paces to the site of the original fort, which is now completely gone. From there it's easy to find the old clearing, now covered in underbrush to hide our trapdoor. I feel a pang of guilt at the sight of it. Poor Janelle is never going to be allowed to know about this place. But the guys are right. With her dad being a cop, it's just too risky. It has to stay a secret. Still, how am I ever going to explain why it's taking me so long to get to her house today? Maybe I'll say my bike blew a tire. But that would be another *lie*! This is so not good for a serious relationship!

C.J. helps me open the trapdoor, so he's obviously not as close to death as I thought he was.

The first thing I notice about the fort is that the lights are on.

C.J. is horrified, which makes his face look even more distorted and grotesque than it already is. "Somebody's down there!" he hisses.

I'm pretty upset too. What does this mean? We've barely had a chance to claim the old bomb shelter as our own, and already someone is stealing it out from under us?

We descend the ladder as silently as possible, ready to fight

for what's ours. Sure enough, the intruder is flaked out on the couch, face hidden behind . . .

"A science textbook?" I blurt, too loud, as usual.

The book goes flying and the reader lifts eight inches off the couch, landing flat on his face on the rug.

Ricky Molina.

"Ricky, you idiot!" C.J. explodes. "You nearly gave us a heart attack!"

"What are you doing here?" I demand.

"I'm studying," he defends himself. "I've got the big test to get into the new magnet school."

"And you can't do that at home?" I howl.

"My baby sister has colic. She cries twenty-four/seven. I came here for peace and quiet and fell asleep on the couch." He plucks his fallen glasses off the carpet, pops them onto his nose, and stares at C.J. "What happened to you?"

"I defied death," C.J. replies.

"Almost," I add.

Ricky heads into the kitchen and reaches on tiptoe to a top shelf. "There's a first-aid kit. I don't know what's in it, but I'll bet it's good stuff. This place was built to survive a nuclear attack."

I'm not sure why this kid annoys me so much. Maybe it's the whole magnet-school thing. Like it would be the end of the world if he had to stay at Canaan Middle. Or maybe it just bugs me that he gets to be a full partner in our fort while I'm not even allowed to tell Janelle one word about it. Either way, Ricky is a major know-it-all who rubs me the wrong way.

But sometimes it's not so bad to have a know-it-all around. Ricky is practically like an emergency room doctor. He washes C.J.'s head with soap and water from the sink, applies antiseptic ointment, and tops it off with an expert bandaging job.

By the time Evan and Mitchell arrive, it's all over. They seem pretty ticked off that they bought Band-Aids and cream for nothing. The only thing that gets used is the cold pack, which Ricky orders C.J. to apply to his head.

"I'm totally fine," C.J. continues to claim. But he seems content to recline on the couch, holding the ice pack in place.

"Don't get too comfortable," Mitchell warns him. "We have to leave."

"Leave?" I echo. "Why?"

"I just paced off the floor," Mitchell reports tragically. "This fort is twelve and a half feet wide."

"So?" Evan demands.

Mitchell stares at him. "So if you round it up, that makes thirteen! We can't stay in an unlucky fort!"

"Round down," C.J. suggests from behind the cold pack.

"That won't change anything," Mitchell scoffs. "You can't avoid the unlucky number by pretending it isn't there. That's like those buildings that have no thirteenth floor. That just makes floor fourteen the *real* unlucky floor."

Ricky shoots him a strange look. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"It's not my fault," Mitchell sulks. "Blame Dr. Breckinridge. He's the guy who dropped me as a patient the minute we lost our medical coverage."

My phone pings. A text from Janelle. *Where U?*

Now what am I supposed to say? I can't tell her the truth. I text back *Flat tire* and hate myself.

"This is boring," C.J. declares. "How long do I have to ice my head?"

"Probably more than the thirty seconds you've done so far," Evan informs him.

Ricky is on his hands and knees at the old-fashioned record player that sits on the same cabinet holding the TV and videotape machine. "I've seen these before but I never really figured out how they work."

He pulls a vinyl record from its sleeve, pops it onto the turntable, and pushes the power button. The disk begins to spin slowly, but otherwise, nothing happens.

Pretty soon, all five of us are right there with him, trying to figure out how this alien machine is supposed to function.

"I think you use that arm thingy." Evan grabs the mechanical arm and drops it onto the moving record. A loud scratching sound blasts out of the speakers as the needle bounces across the black vinyl before it finds a groove, and a song starts to play.

"Hey, I know this!" I exclaim. "I think it's from a movie!"

"Yeah," Mitchell agrees. "Old people music is in movies all the time."

We play albums by Queen, Michael Jackson, the Bee Gees, Prince, Bruce Springsteen, and the Rolling Stones. Even though the music is old, there isn't a single track that at least one of us doesn't recognize from either movies, video games, or our parents and grandparents. And when the record ends, we

all gather around to watch as the arm lifts up and moves back to its resting position—like it's the greatest feat of technology we've ever seen. The first time it happens, Mitchell applauds.

The Bee Gees are my personal favorite, because that's disco, and Janelle says I'm a great dancer. But when I show everybody how to do it, the guys start pelting me with elastic bandages from the first-aid kit. Ricky nails me right in the nose with the metal clip part—which bugs me double, because he's not even a real part of our group. He's just some stranger we have to let in because he found the trapdoor.

By this time, we're starting to get hungry, which opens up a pretty major debate. There's tons of food in the fort. The problem is it's been here for at least forty years. Is it safe to eat?

Out come our phones for some serious web surfing. Not Mitchell, of course—his Samsung is out of commission until he can get the screen repaired. We all ask the same question and get four different answers, ranging from "totally safe" to "prepare to die."

We google around a little longer until a point of agreement starts to emerge from all the articles we find: Basically, canned food is safe forever—with a single warning. The can has to be in perfect condition. The slightest hole, the slightest bulge in the tin or breakage of the vacuum seal, and you might as well be eating cyanide.

Well, that's the last thing you should ever say to a guy like Mitchell. He starts grabbing cans and examining them at such close range that it looks like he's trying to penetrate them with

his eyeballs. If there was an electron microscope in the fort, he would use that too.

C.J. pulls a tin of ravioli right out of Mitchell's hand and tosses it in the air experimentally. "Looks okay to me." He plunges a can opener into it and turns the crank until the lid pops free. Then he plucks out a square of pasta and tosses it in his mouth.

We all stare at C.J. like we're expecting him to explode.

He chews thoughtfully. "Not bad."

"How long is it going to take him to die?" Mitchell asks the rest of us.

In answer, C.J. gulps down two more pieces.

"Don't eat with your grubby hands," Ricky admonishes. "We've got a full kitchen here. With real china plates. And"—he throws open the cutlery drawer—"yuck."

Inside are neat rows of forks, knives, and spoons—all black.

"Bennett Delamere was a pretty weird guy," Evan comments. "He spares no expense building the ultimate bomb shelter, fills it with nothing but the best stuff, and then cheaps out on the knives and forks."

"Maybe rich people liked it that way in the 1970s," Mitchell suggests. "You know, black is the new black."

"No way," I put in. "My dad bought the cheapest stuff he could find when he moved into his apartment and it's still a lot nicer than this."

Gross cutlery or not, we rinse it in the sink and use it. We heat up ravioli, beef stew, and baked beans on the counter

cooktop and eat it on elegant china plates, using black forks. It's our first official snack in our official fort, and it somehow feels important—like an opening ceremony or something. Forty-year-old cans or not, nothing ever tasted better.

Good news: Mitchell's OCD means he can't stand to have dirty dishes lying around, so we all let him clean up.

C.J. stretches out on the couch and puts the cold pack back on his head for a little more ice time. "I wish I could stay here forever," he sighs in contentment.

We all know exactly what he means. Your own place. No parents. No teachers. No rules.

But we've been here a few hours by now, and the texts are starting to come in: Where are we? What time will we be coming home? Is everything okay?

"Oh man—I forgot Janelle!" I jump up so high that I almost hit the low ceiling. Somehow, being underground makes you lose track of everything on earth level. "She thinks I'm still fixing my bike! I'm so dead!"

It doesn't help that the others are laughing their heads off. Some friends. You'd think that when you're co-owner of a fort with a bunch of guys, it would be kind of a brotherhood. Fat chance. Pretty soon they're chanting *"Ro-me-o! Ro-me-o!"* Even Ricky, who hasn't earned the right to call me that yet.

They're still chanting as we climb out of the fort and replace the scattered branches to camouflage the trapdoor.

I groan. "It's already getting dark." I turn to C.J. "You've got to come with me to Janelle's. She'll take one look at your head and forget how late I am."

He grins at me. "I can't lie to Juliet. Only Romeo gets to do that."

"Well, somebody should back me up. Evan? Mitchell?"

Mitchell shakes his head. "Can't. As soon as it's dark enough, I have to go water my plants."

Ricky is confused. "What plants do you water in the dark?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

We all know, but we're not going to tell Magnet Boy. Mitchell may be strange, but he's one of us. And Ricky isn't.

"Later, guys!" I run ahead of the others, my mind on my bike and Janelle. They chant *"Ro-me-o!"* but I barely hear it.

I'm already dreaming up excuses.

CHAPTER SIX

EVAN DONNELLY

Ricky is in my math class. He's also with me in English and social studies, but he's way more annoying in math. He knows more than Mr. Kanciper, and he never misses a chance to explain how he picked up all these wonderful fun facts in his magnet school. When you're a jumped-up seventh grader, this isn't going to make you very popular with anyone in the eighth grade. Why, oh why, does my grandma have to work with Mrs. Molina? It's a genuine bummer to be co-owner of a fort with such a creep.

"I'd like to wrap him up in his magnets and attach him to the underside of the Brooklyn Bridge," C.J. mumbles beside me.

All through the day Monday, I struggle to keep my mind off Ricky by watching the clock, which is moving the slowest it ever has. C.J. is doing it too. The swelling on his head has come down quite a lot, but Ricky's bandage is still in place—another Ricky reminder. He probably got first-aid training in magnet school, where all good things happen.

Whatever. The school day still has hours to go, but my heart is already out the door. The other guys feel the same way. The minute the three-thirty bell sounds, we're going to the fort.

"There's no soccer practice, but I have to walk Janelle

home," Jason tells us. He's trying to whisper, but his whispering is still too loud when we're talking about the fort, which is supposed to be secret. "I owe her that much after standing her up last weekend. Don't start the movie without me."

Before we left last time, we discovered a whole box of videotapes, real classic old movies like the original *Star Wars*, *Alien*, and *Jaws*—which is considered to be the greatest shark movie in history. At this rate, we're not going to be done watching all the movies, listening to all the records, and eating all the canned beans until we're at least thirty.

"Don't keep us waiting, Romeo," C.J. warns.

In the cafeteria at lunch, we learn that Mitchell's mind has been on our afternoon plans too. "I've heard *Jaws* is scary."

"A giant shark swimming around sinking boats and eating people?" C.J. muses. "Nah—not scary at all."

Mitchell doesn't find this at all helpful. "So would you say *Jaws* is *really* scary or just medium scary?" he asks.

"How would we know?" I retort. "We haven't seen it yet, same as you."

Jason is willing to take a stab at it. "I'm guessing scarier than medium, but not as scary as really."

"Well, okay, but we're not turning off the lights," Mitchell announces.

"You can say that again," I tell him. "The only way to do that is to shut down power to the whole fort. And then the video thingy won't play."

When the bell finally rings, C.J., Mitchell, and I hurry to our meeting place in the crowded hallway. We're anxious to

get to the fort, sure. But part of our plan is to get out of the school before Ricky can latch onto us. Nothing personal—we all agree that it's his fort too. Still, that doesn't mean he has to be there every time we are.

"He'll probably show up anyway," C.J. predicts darkly as we rush for the exit.

"Yeah, to *study*," Mitchell adds, making it into a five-syllable word. "Talk about a waste of a good fort!"

We burst out the front entrance and freeze. An unmuffled car engine is roaring in the pickup line. There, amid the minivans and SUVs, Jaeger's red Mustang perches on its too-big tires. Jaeger's at the wheel, his face its usual study in boredom and ill will. My brother, Luke, is in the passenger seat, scanning the departing crowd of kids.

"We could pretend we don't see them," C.J. whispers into my ear.

"No good." I sigh. "They'll just follow us. The last thing we need is those guys finding out about the fort."

"So what do we do?" Mitchell asks.

"You guys go ahead of me," I decide. "With any luck, I can ditch them quick and make it to the fort in time for the movie."

"Watch yourself," C.J. warns. "I know he's your brother, but he's Jaeger's animal now."

"I'm on it."

"Hey, look who it is!" Luke exclaims with a big phony grin when I approach the Mustang. Like he's totally amazed to see me leaving my own school at dismissal time.

Against my better judgment, I climb into the back seat, because I know they're not going to go away until I do.

"Cutting ninth period?" I ask Luke. The high school doesn't get out for another twenty minutes yet.

"Oh yeah. Started early. Like right after breakfast."

I shrug. "It's your funeral. If Grandma finds out, you're a dead man."

"You won't tell her," Jaeger drawls. That's the difference between him and Luke. When Jaeger says it, it's not a statement. It's a threat.

We pull out of the driveway with a squeal. Somehow, Jaeger manages to cut off every parent at Canaan Middle School and leave them stewing and honking in anger.

"So what's this about?" I ask as we lurch onto the main road, driving far too fast.

"I can't give my little brother a ride home from school?" Luke demands.

"We have a small project that requires your special skill set," Jaeger explains smoothly.

That makes me uneasy, because a) it's coming from Jaeger, and b) I have no special skill set.

"What project?" I ask Luke. I never speak directly to Jaeger, even though he's the one who answers most of the time.

We pull up in front of Doyle's Luncheonette, a small greasy spoon diner that's been in Canaan forever. It may have been started by someone named Doyle, but as long as I can remember, it's been run by an ancient man named Kyriako.

They drag me inside to a table, and Jaeger orders Cokes all around and "a plate of your finest French fries with gravy!"

"I'm not hungry," I protest as Kyriako shuffles off to fill our order.

"Fake it," Luke snarls.

That's when Jaeger explains what we're there for, turning the blood in my veins to ice. "When Kyriako brings people their change, he always leaves the cash drawer open. So when that table in the back pays their bill, you sneak up, clean out the register, and buzz off. We'll pick you up in front of the 7-Eleven down the block."

"I'm not going to do that!" I hiss. "Why can't you do it?"

Jaeger has an answer for that too. "You're a kid. If you get caught, it's a juvie offense—a slap on the wrist. But your brother and me—we're over sixteen. We could be tried as adults."

"Why does it have to happen at *all*?" I persist.

"Don't be such a wimp," Luke scoffs. "Like you never swiped anything."

"I haven't!"

"We're doing it for you," Jaeger reasons. "I'd feel terrible if I had to drive you out to Plymouth Springs and leave you there without a phone. That's a fifteen-mile walk home along the interstate. And you know how the clouds of mosquitoes come out once it starts to get dark."

He says it in the friendliest tone, but I can tell from the look on his smarmy face that he'd do it in a heartbeat. That's why he chose a place fifteen miles away, not ninety. A fifteen-mile

hike is just doable enough that you can picture yourself struggling along the soft shoulder in the pitch-black, while transport trucks roar by, just about blowing you into the ditch.

I turn to Luke. "And you'd let him do that to me?"

My big brother looks away uncomfortably, which says more than a giant billboard ringed with chaser lights. I never thought things could get worse for our family than when Mom and Dad walked away from us and we had to move in with Grandma and Grandpa. At least back then, it was Luke and me against the world, and all our problems made us closer than close.

So, yeah, this is worse. This is rock bottom.

"Of course he wouldn't." Now Jaeger's voice is comforting. "And I wouldn't ask him to. That's why you're going to do us this solid. Look—that other table's paying their bill. You're on."

I can't move at first, like I'm glued to my seat. Luke delivers a swift kick to the leg of my chair and up I pop to avoid being knocked over. I'm in a daze as I head for the front counter and the cash register, which sits open, just the way Jaeger predicted. As I move, zombielike, across the floor, it hits me that I have absolutely no idea what's going to happen next. On the one hand, I can't steal the money. I'm not a thief. But a quick glance at Jaeger reminds me that I can't *not* steal it either—not unless I'm looking forward to a fifteen-mile hike home from Plymouth Springs.

I'm dragging my feet, but I'm almost there now. The cash drawer is right in front of me. All I'd have to do is lean over,

grab a fistful of bills, and run. Kyriako is in the farthest corner of the restaurant, his back to me, exchanging bad jokes with his customers. It's now or never.

I reach out—which is weird, because I have zero intention of taking anything. Maybe I'm just trying to see if my arm actually moves that way. Or I might be thinking that the longer I seem like I'm going along with the plan, the longer I delay the inevitable confrontation with Luke and Jaeger.

At that moment, the front door opens and none other than Ricky Molina walks in, smiling broadly. "Hi, Evan. I thought that was you!" His eyes fall on my hand and the open cash drawer, and his grin morphs into a look of confusion.

I reach down, pluck a mint from the dish on the counter, and pop it into my mouth. "Hey, Ricky. Let's go."

I push him out the door and yank him down the block in about eight seconds.

"Wasn't that your brother and his friend in there?" Ricky protests.

"They're still eating," I explain. "I'm done." The best part is that Kyriako is now looking our way so Luke and Jaeger won't be able to come after me until they pay their bill for the Cokes and fries. So I'm off the hook for the moment. I'll have to face them eventually, but at least I'll have some time to think about how to play it.

Ricky searches my face. "You know, for a minute there, it looked like you were going for the cash in the register."

I laugh. "Are you kidding? My grandma would kill me." I

sound a lot more certain than I am. The memory of standing in front of that cash drawer is going to stay with me for a long time. At no point was I ever planning to steal that money. But I wasn't leaving either. Would I have done it? I guess I'll never be sure. The one thing I know is that Ricky came along at exactly the right time.

I must be speeding up, because Ricky asks, "What's the rush? Where are we going?"

I look at him. "Have you ever seen *Jaws*?"

We watch *Jaws* all the way through, and then we watch it again from the beginning so we can vote on what's the grossest part—the dead guy's head or the bitten-off leg. The boat captain sliding down the deck into the shark's mouth takes third place.

We're all really late for dinner, and none of us is very hungry, since we split three cans of forty-year-old chili while binge-watching a movie with—let's face it—a lot of blood. Mitchell barfed in the chemical toilet, so at least we know that works.

I'm just finishing up some homework when the roar of Jaeger's Mustang rattles the windows. A few minutes later, Luke comes into my room.

"Real stupid, Evan," he tells me gravely. "Jaeger's pretty ticked off at you."

"I don't lie awake nights stressing about Jaeger," I assure

him. It's mostly bluff, because Jaeger scares the heck out of me. If he doesn't keep me awake nights, it's only because I refuse to think about him at all.

"Yeah, well, maybe you should," Luke presses. "He's not the kind of guy you want to mess with. How long do you think I can protect you from him?"

I glare at him. "You mean the way you protected me today from letting him turn me into a thief?"

"Kyriako's a rich man," Luke scoffs. "That's his Lexus parked in front of Doyle's. He's got money to spare!"

"Right. And it's his money, not Jaeger's. Mom and Dad got their hands on other people's money too, and we know what they bought with it."

His face flames red. "I know all about Mom and Dad. I'm their kid too, same as you."

"Then why would you hang out with a guy who's only going to get you mixed up with the same kind of problems?"

"I don't tell you not to run with that pack of nerds you call friends," he shoots back. "Even that Ricky loser Grandma stuck you with. The kid almost bought you a fifteen-mile hike back from Plymouth Springs. You think Jaeger was joking about that?"

Luke's face is carved from granite. But I know him too well. I detect the slight twitch in the skin of his right cheek. "You're scared of him too!" I accuse him.

I've hit a nerve, because Luke changes the subject. "Where were you all afternoon?"

"Home."

"Don't give me that! That's the first place we looked. We searched the whole town. It's like you disappeared off the face of the earth!"

Maybe that's because I wasn't on the surface of the earth. I was below it.

As long as I've got the fort, I'll have a place where my brother and Jaeger will never be able to find me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RICKY MOLINA

It bugs me from day one—how can the fort have electricity? There are no power lines leading into the woods, no poles to carry them. And obviously, no utility bills arrive at the trapdoor every month. Where's the post office supposed to deliver to—*Hole in the Ground, #1 Termite Stump Lane, 26 Paces from the Trail, Canaan*?

But when I mention this to Evan, his reply is: "What do you care where the power comes from so long as it comes?"

"But aren't you *curious*?" I persist.

And he isn't. Neither are the others. Mitchell looks at me like I've got a cabbage for a head just for thinking of it.

Or maybe it's not so much curiosity as my willingness to do a little legwork. I find a fuse box below the ceiling at the far end of the fort, past the couch. And when I loosen that and check behind it, the wires lead into a piece of conduit pipe that goes out of the bomb shelter and into the ground. That could be why the fort had electricity the morning after the storm—its power line is buried instead of up in the air, where falling branches can damage it. After all, when Bennett Delamere built this place, he was preparing for the aftermath of a war, with who-knows-what kind of destruction in Canaan.

Guesstimating the direction of the pipe, I walk out of the woods into town, searching for where the fort's wires connect to the power grid. Sure enough, right in front of the public library, the same kind of conduit piping comes up out of the pavement and climbs the pole, hooking into the transformer at the top.

"Don't you get it?" I tell the guys. "Not only do we have electricity, but I'm pretty sure the Canaan Library is picking up the tab!"

C.J. shrugs. "It's just a few light bulbs."

"It's more than that," I argue. "There's the TV and the record player. Even the water in the kitchen—it comes from a well. The pump that brings water to the tap runs on electricity."

It's not that they don't believe me. They just don't care. It drives me nuts, but I'm trying to see it from their point of view. My favorite food is pizza, and when I eat it, I don't have to analyze how tomato sauce, cheese, and bread come together in a chemical reaction in your mouth. It's enough for me to enjoy how it tastes.

The fort is like pizza.

"Go-o-o-o!!!"

I'm thirty feet away from the trapdoor when I hear Jason hollering. The guy has a voice like the wall of speakers at a rock concert. These are the kids who don't trust *me* to keep the fort a secret!

I'm already complaining as I climb down the ladder and jump to the floor. "Very careless, you guys! They can probably hear you on the International Space Station—"

The sight that meets my eyes cuts out my voice in mid-sentence. Evan and Jason are jumping up and down on the couch, cheering at the top of their lungs, while C.J. and Mitchell squirm on their bellies, their hands tied behind their backs. Their heads move like pistons as they push eggs across the floor with their noses.

C.J. reaches the far wall first, where Evan and Jason haul him to his feet and pound his back and shoulders with slaps of congratulation.

"No fair!" Mitchell complains bitterly. "I got the slower egg!"

I storm over to them. "If you guys don't tone it down, we're going to get caught in here. And that'll be the end of the fort."

The celebration ends abruptly.

"Oh, hey, Ricky," Evan says, a little sheepishly.

"I could hear you all the way from the trail," I accuse him. "What's going on here?"

C.J. reddens, except for the wounded parts of his face that are already multicolored. "It's the Fort Olympics."

"Olympics?" That's when I notice that Evan, Jason, and C.J. are wearing paper "medals" around their necks, tied with knitting yarn.

Mitchell has none, and he looks pretty ticked off about it. "These events stink. They're all rigged."

It dawns on me. They're not embarrassed because they're

putting the fort at risk. They're embarrassed because they left me out of their lousy Olympics.

"Sorry, Ricky," Evan mumbles, studying the floor. "We were going to tell you, but . . ." He can't come up with the end of that lie, so his words just trail off.

Like I care about not being invited to the Goofball Games. Only . . . the more I think about it, the more it bothers me. I was the one who spotted the trapdoor in the first place. If it wasn't for me, they wouldn't even *have* a fort. Where do they get off?

"Don't be mad," C.J. wheedles. "There are still a few events to go. How are you at ladder gymnastics?"

"Hey!" Mitchell protests. "You said you were going to let *me* win at ladder gymnastics."

"Or skull crushers," Jason suggests. "We tie a grapefruit to your head, and you try to jump up and squash it on the ceiling. Don't worry—we brought in the grapefruit and the eggs. They're not from cans."

I'm intrigued in spite of myself. The ceiling in here is so low that it just might be possible. "I'm the shortest. Do I get extra points for degree of difficulty?"

I take silver in skull crushers, losing to C.J., who jumps like a kangaroo. When my grapefruit splits and the juice starts trickling down my face, I might yell even louder than Jason.

Mitchell wins gold in ladder gymnastics, because he's the only contestant. Evan and Jason tie in soup-can long jump. I finally strike gold in vinyl-record Frisbee, but it's a disaster for

Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, disc two. And anyway, we get so much slime on our medals during Skull Crushers: Egg Edition that all the awards wind up in the garbage, along with Pink Floyd and three slightly dented soup cans Mitchell won't let us eat.

I head home sticky with juice and yolk, and as sweaty as if I'd participated in the real Olympics. I had a great time—but as I let myself into my house, I realize that if I hadn't walked in on the guys this afternoon, they would have been just as happy to do all that fun stuff without me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MITCHELL WORTH

The word I hate the most in the English language has to be *appropriate.*

As in: It's not *appropriate* for me to behave the way I do in my classes. I used to be able to keep it *appropriate* back in seventh grade. But lately a lot of the old habits have been popping up again.

"Exactly what 'old habits' are you referring to?" my mother asks the principal.

The worst part of parent meetings is being talked about like I'm not right here in the room.

Dr. Burgoyne consults some notes on her desk. "Oh, foot tapping, nervous distraction, constantly leaving to use the bathroom—"

"Do you know how many germs there are in a school?" I put in. "Sue me for having good hygiene."

"Then there's the problem of your locker. The door is scratched and dented, and the custodians decided to find out why. The door won't close properly, because the locker in jammed full of—I can't even describe it. Where do you find it all?"

"Oh, Mitch!" Mom shoots me an exasperated look.

"If I throw out stuff that I need later, I'll get in trouble," I defend myself.

"And the math department has a special complaint," the principal continues.

My mother knows exactly where this is heading. "Thirteen is a perfectly normal number," she tells me, "and everyone's allowed to use it."

"Their right to use it stops where it can get me killed," I retort. "Bad enough I have to *be* thirteen for a whole year."

Dr. Burgoyne sighs. "We felt he had these behaviors under better control. But lately, there's been some backsliding. Have there been any major changes in Mitchell's life recently?"

Mom nods. "Last year he was working with a therapist. But there's been a change in my employment situation—my *insurance* situation. And we had to quit that."

It drives me crazy that she can make it sound so natural—*A change in my employment situation*. That's how adults describe losing a great job and replacing it with three lousy jobs that don't even have health insurance. That's why Mom is so tired every night that a good day means she can make it through dinner without falling asleep in her plate. And why I can't go to Dr. Breckinridge anymore—not that I'd even want to see such a class-A jerk.

"I understand," the principal says, and she probably sympathizes. Everyone in Canaan knows at least a couple of people who were laid off by DelaCraft Auto Parts. Most of them are having the same kind of issues we are. "But for the time being,

Mitchell needs to find a way to make his behavior less . . . disruptive."

In other words, this is *my* problem. Principals always pretend they want to help, but when you actually try to get them to do it, you might as well talk to the wall.

Dr. Burgoyne shakes hands with both of us as we leave the office. That costs me five good minutes of hand washing in the boys' room.

"That went pretty well, don't you think?" Mom asks when I come out.

I almost explode in her face. Pretty much everything about my life stinks except for the fact that I have friends and we've got an amazing fort we can go to whenever we want. And pretty much everything about this school stinks except for the fact that my friends go here too. But can I be with them? No, because they're all in better classes than I am.

I'm about to go off on Mom when I notice her stooped shoulders and the dark shadows under her eyes. Plus tonight is her late shift at the assisted living community, so she's still got a long work day ahead. The last thing she needs is to get yelled at by me.

So I manage, "Thanks for trying, Mom."

She tells me not to wait up tonight and reminds me that there's leftover pizza in the fridge. I already know that I'm not going to be eating it.

I've got my eye on a tin of forty-year-old spaghetti and meatballs instead.

By the time I make it to the woods, the worry ramps up to real panic. They forced me to stay after school to make up the work I missed during that meeting with the principal, so I'm going to be the last guy to get to the fort today. What if somebody already ate my spaghetti and meatballs? I sprint along the trail, too stressed to tap tree trunks. Why didn't I write my name on the can? But that might only draw people's attention to it. When we set up the fort rules, we never worked out a system of dibs on the food tins. How could we be so careless? But even with a system, that wouldn't cover Ricky, who isn't really our friend. He could eat somebody else's spaghetti and meatballs just to tick a guy off!

The problem with obsessive-compulsive disorder is once you get obsessed, you can't get it out of your head. The harder you try *not* to think about something, the more you're thinking about it. I'm so anxious that I count twenty-six paces from the termite stump instead of twenty-five or twenty-seven. By the time I get to the fort, I'm lucky not to tumble down the ladder and crack my skull.

I turn out to be *un*lucky, though, because I miss *The Empire Strikes Back*. Everybody's already left except C.J.

"The others took off about twenty minutes ago," he tells me. "I hung out to grab some dinner."

"Not spaghetti and meatballs!" I gasp.

"Nah, I've got a taste for the pork and beans," he replies.

"But I should probably get going. I picked up a rock in my gigantathons."

"What's a gigantathon?"

"You know those giant Rollerblades that are almost like skis?" he explains. "There's a rock jammed between the wheels, and they're useless if I can't dig it out."

Out of all of us, C.J. always has the coolest stuff. He's not rich or anything, but his stepdad, Marcus, loves buying him presents. Must be nice. I try not to get jealous, but sometimes it's hard, money being tight with Mom and me. If I let myself get jealous, I'll end up hating C.J., which would be terrible, because he's my friend.

Then again, I could never be jealous of anything called gigantathons, which sound kind of dangerous. No wonder C.J. is a mass of scabs and bruises half the time.

C.J. steps into the kitchen, opens a drawer, and comes up with a large black dinner fork. "This might do the trick."

I frown. "To dig out the stone? Couldn't you use a screwdriver or something like that?"

The expression on his face freezes. "I don't use Marcus's tools."

"He'd totally let you," I reason.

"I don't use anything of his."

I can tell the subject is closed. Maybe C.J. doesn't want to hit up his stepdad for too many favors because then the presents might stop coming. If I ever find somebody who gives me stuff, I might understand.

There's no point hanging out in the fort by myself—not

even for spaghetti and meatballs. So when C.J. leaves, I go with him. We do a good job of camouflaging the trapdoor with branches. One upside of OCD—you don't do anything halfway.

We make our way to C.J.'s house, and he gets the gigantathons out of the garage. They're not quite as long as skis, but they really do look like them. And sure enough, a round stone is jammed in the wheels under the left boot.

"Wait a minute," I say warily. "You've got six wheels on each skate, plus that rock—that makes thirteen circles."

He holds up the fork we brought from the fort. "But we're getting number thirteen out, remember?"

"Well, do it quickly."

Just then, the door to the house opens and Marcus comes into the garage. "Oh, hi, guys. What's up?"

"We're leaving," C.J. says in a monotone, without glancing in his stepfather's direction.

"I thought we were getting the rock out of your Rollerblades," I tell him in surprise.

That gets Marcus's attention. "I'll help you."

"We're good." C.J. takes the left skate and leads me out of the garage.

I say goodbye to Marcus and follow C.J. to the park at the end of the block. I'm dying to know why C.J. would be mean to a guy who buys him stuff. But C.J. obviously doesn't want to talk about it.

We sit down on the bench at the corner of the playground, and C.J. goes to work with the fork. That rock must be really

jammed in there, because it isn't budging. The scraping of the fork against the stone creates a chalk-on-blackboard sound that could make any OCD guy want to jump out of his own skin.

An older lady has to duck as the rock pops out of the wheels and whizzes across the path.

"What are you doing?" she yells.

C.J. jumps up, dropping the fork, which skitters to her feet. "Oops, sorry about that."

She bends down and picks it up. "Why would you use a beautiful piece of cutlery like this to fix a skate?"

"Beautiful?" I repeat.

That's when I get a good look at the fork in her hands. The handle is still gross. But the tines, which have been scraping against the rock, are shiny silver.

"What happened to the fork?" C.J. wonders.

"You chipped off some of the tarnish," the lady explains. "This piece is solid silver. Feel how heavy it is." She hands it back to C.J. "Take this home to your mother. It's probably worth hundreds."

"Of *dollars*?" I blurt.

"Of course dollars. All it needs is a little silver polish." With that, she walks off, leaving us standing there, openmouthed.

C.J. looks at me, wide-eyed. "We've got a whole drawer of this stuff back at the fort!"

"I hope she's not wrong," I moan. "Have you heard any news stories about a mean old lady going around getting people's hopes up by telling them they're rich when they're not?"

"There must be some way to figure out how much it's

worth," C.J. muses. "We'll call a meeting tomorrow—see what the other guys say."

That's how I know how C.J.'s mind doesn't work like mine. You don't tell a guy like me that he *might* be rich and then leave it till tomorrow. The rest of the day, I don't go five seconds without thinking of that silver fork. Not when we're carefully replacing it in the kitchen drawer of the fort. Not when I'm eating my forty-year-old spaghetti and meatballs. Not even later that night, when I'm watering my plants, making sure each leaf and stem glistens with droplets in the moonlight.

CHAPTER NINE

EVAN DONNELLY

I get picked to take the silver fork to the pawnshop.

Of course I do. Who knows more about pawnshops than me? When Mom and Dad were using—which was, like, ninety-five percent of the time—they used to send Luke and me to pawnshops all over town to hawk our stuff, because they needed cash.

Every now and then, my brother and I would have to sell something that I didn't recognize.

"Oh, it was just lying around up in the attic," Mom would explain, handing over the porcelain vase, or crystal bowl, or whatever it was.

I was too young to understand, but Luke knew. "We don't have an attic, stupid. We live in an apartment. The reason you don't recognize that ashtray is because Dad ripped it off!"

"You mean, he *stole* it?"

"Of course he stole it! He does it all the time!"

A lot of things started making sense to me that day. Our parents spread their business around pawnshops all over Canaan. But when the stuff we were selling was stolen, they always sent us to the same place—T.K. Pawn and Checks

Cashed, on Eleventh Street. When I asked Dad why, he told me, "Tommy, the owner, keeps his mouth shut."

That's how I know T.K. is the pawnshop for us and our silver fork.

Well, technically, it isn't *our* silver fork—it's Bennett Delamere's. But since he's dead, what does he care? And he didn't have any kids to inherit his stuff. Ricky did a little research on the internet, and it turns out that none of the Delamere relatives wanted to be his heir. DelaCraft Auto Parts is still in business, but these days, they owe more money than they make. The Delamere mansion is an old wreck with a giant mortgage on it. The only good thing the family owns is the fort—and nobody knows about that but us. It isn't *ours* exactly, but it isn't theirs either. Believe it or not, it was Mitchell who said it best: "It's like an old couch somebody left by the side of the road. Finders keepers."

T.K. Pawn and Checks Cashed is a dumpy storefront in a dumpier neighborhood—not that much of Canaan is paved with gold. The dumpiest thing about it is Tommy himself. He always reminds me of a weasel, with thick glasses at the end of a pointy nose. But I'm not looking at him. My eyes are on the Xbox on the shelf, halfway down the aisle. It used to belong to Luke and me. Or maybe that one sold, and this is some other poor sap's game console, that he had to sacrifice "for the good of the family."

Dad was right about Tommy being discreet. He doesn't say hello to me, although I've been in his shop at least a dozen times. He doesn't ask where a kid got his hands on a solid silver

fork. He doesn't ask about Ricky, who he's never seen before in his life.

His eyes light up at the sight of the fork. I can't really blame him. Ricky brought some silver polish from home into the fort and took the black tarnish right off. It's shiny, with a lot of super-fancy engravings, and you can see yourself in the flat parts, like it's a mirror.

The shopkeeper holds it in his palm, feeling the weight, and then puts it on a scale. "Very nice," he pronounces finally. "I'll give you twenty bucks for it."

"It's worth a lot more than that," Ricky pipes up.

It's why I brought him with me: a) He's smart, and b) he'll say anything to anybody. That's the main reason the guys find him so annoying. Me too, but I'm starting to appreciate what the kid has to offer. None of the rest of us would have the guts to stand up to a professional pawnbroker.

Still, Tommy hasn't stayed in business all these years by letting himself be pushed around by some kid. "Suit yourselves," he says with a big shrug, offering the fork back.

"You see those three nines on the back of the handle?" Ricky tells him. "That means ninety-nine-point-nine percent pure silver. Plus the pattern isn't made anymore. So this is a unique piece—except that we have a drawer full of it."

"Thirty bucks," the pawnbroker offers.

That's thirty bucks more than we had when we walked in here, so I'm ready to grab it. But not Ricky. He goes into this whole speech about troy ounces and American silversmiths versus British silversmiths. It's a good thing nobody ever sent me

to magnet school, because if this is the kind of stuff you have to know, I would have been expelled.

In the end we bargain the guy up to eighty-five dollars cash. I honestly couldn't be more amazed if Ricky had reached up his nose and pulled out that money.

I'm practically dancing as we leave T.K. Pawn and Checks Cashed. I don't even care about my Xbox anymore. "Where'd you learn all that stuff about silver?" I ask him.

"You could have found it out too," he informs me. "It's all on Google."

Maybe that's the real difference between Ricky and the rest of us. We all *could have* researched those things. He's the only one who *did*.

"Anyway, I think we did well," he continues. "Based on the weight, my guess is that fork is worth a hundred and sixty bucks. Whenever you get better than fifty percent from a pawnbroker, you're ahead of the game."

Mitchell, Jason, and C.J. are waiting for us around the next corner. I fan the cash like a hand of cards and they freak out. Everybody's head is in the same place—the cutlery drawer in the kitchen of the fort.

"I knew it!" C.J. exults. "Bennett Delamere wouldn't own anything cheap! We could buy a Lamborghini or something!"

"We could rent my dad a place that isn't a million miles out of town!" Jason adds, his voice too loud for a subject we want to keep quiet.

"I could pay for health insurance for my mom and me,"

Mitchell puts in. "But I wouldn't go back to Dr. Breckinridge. I hate that guy!"

"Hold your horses," Ricky advises. "By my count, we've got about a hundred pieces in that cutlery drawer. So the most it can be worth is eight or nine thousand dollars. That's a lot of money, but not Lamborghini level. Besides, we have to be careful not to try to sell too many pieces too fast."

"Why not?" I ask.

"If a bunch of kids are suddenly flashing a lot of cash around, people are going to start asking questions about where it came from," Ricky reasons. "And if they find out, it's goodbye, fort."

Mitchell glares at him. "Doesn't it figure? The minute something good happens, you have to come along to take all the joy out of it. Were you always a buzzkill, or is it something they taught you in magnet school?"

Ricky spreads his arms wide. "I'm not saying we can't spend some of the money. I just mean we have to be careful about it."

Splitting eighty-five dollars five ways should mean seventeen bucks apiece, which already doesn't sound so big. So we vote to use our first sale to get the screen of Mitchell's phone fixed. On the surface, this seems like it benefits only Mitchell. But it's actually an upgrade for all of us, since nothing is more frustrating than trying to get in touch with a phone-less friend.

Even Ricky is in favor. "Communication is important. If there's ever any problem with the fort, we need to be able to reach each other instantly."

Mitchell shoots him a stink eye. "I hate when you act like you know so much more than everybody else. But considering I'm getting my phone fixed, I'll let it pass."

Ricky looks a little wounded, but that's just because he doesn't have the history with Mitchell that the rest of us do. Mitchell isn't the type to watch his words to protect someone else's feelings.

Turns out the phone repair is going to cost about fifty dollars. That leaves us thirty-five to invest in assorted snacks to take back to the fort. You can't survive on forty-year-old canned goods forever.

We abandon our friend at the phone place and come back twenty minutes later, bearing a pizza, three bags of chips, and a six-pack of soda. We're all pretty hungry by this time, but Jason is practically drooling.

As usual, the explanation is all about Janelle. "She's really into nutrition, so chips and soda are a no-go," Jason tells us.

"What about pizza?" Ricky asks. "Everybody eats pizza."

Jason shakes his head. "Not Janelle. Not unless the crust is gluten free and you use vegan fake cheese."

C.J. snorts. "We never should have sold that fork. You need to stick it in yourself. You're done, Romeo."

We're about to round the corner to the phone repair shop when an all-too-familiar unmuffled engine shreds the afternoon. I throw out an arm to halt the others behind me. Only one car in Canaan makes an earsplitting racket like that.

I shuffle forward and peer around the corner. Jaeger's red

Mustang idles in front of the phone place. Mitchell stands just outside the front door, repaired phone in hand.

"Hey, Mitchell, got your phone fixed?" That comes from my brother.

"So what if I did?" Mitchell always acts like he's spoiling for a fight, despite the fact that he never knows what to do if he gets one.

The drawl comes from Jaeger behind the wheel. "That's an expensive job, Worthless. How'd you pay for it?"

"I have money."

"This," Jaeger observes, "is how a perfectly friendly conversation gets all tense. Everybody in town knows you and your old lady have nothing in your pockets but lint—"

"Not true!"

"—so I'll ask one more time: Where'd you get the cash?"

I can tell that Mitchell's really sweating now. I'm not afraid he'll rat us out. Mitchell is a hundred percent loyal. But I feel guilty that my friend is in this uncomfortable spot in the first place. It's thanks to my brother that a goon like Jaeger even knows about Mitchell. And the worst part is we can't go and stand by him, because how do we explain all the food we've got? Once a guy like Jaeger gets the idea that there's money he can squeeze out of you, he'll never leave you alone.

Just when it looks like Mitchell is about to fall to pieces, his phone rings. It's the last thing I expected. Besides us, who knows that his phone is fixed?

That's when I see Ricky with his own phone to his ear.

"We're right around the corner," he whispers. "When I give the signal, run!"

"The what?" I hear Mitchell's voice from both the phone and nearby.

"Don't worry," Ricky assures him. "You'll know it when you see it."

What happens next is such a masterpiece of planning that it's almost scary. As a Canaan city bus roars up behind us, Ricky pulls one of the soda cans from the six-pack and shakes it vigorously. Just when the big vehicle turns the corner, he pops the top and tosses the exploding drink right out into the driver's path. The man jams on the brakes and the bus jolts to a stop—directly behind Jaeger's Mustang.

A split second later, Mitchell comes running around the corner, hugging his phone.

"Let's get out of here!" I rasp, and we take off down a cross street, chip bags bouncing on the pizza box in my arms.

We can already hear the screech of tires and a chorus of horns as Jaeger tries to make an illegal U-turn around the stopped bus on the main drag. We don't stop running until we've made it to the woods. And even then, we keep it at a jog until we're far enough down the path to be sure that we're out of sight.

"That was some quick thinking back there, man!" I praise Ricky, still gasping for breath.

Mitchell wags a finger at Ricky. "But if any of those chips got broken, it's your fault."

"They're all broken," Ricky retorts, panting. "That's why they call them chips."

"That shows what *you* know. I only eat full chips. But," he adds grudgingly, "you did a good thing."

"Real good!" Jason booms.

"Genius," C.J. agrees.

Maybe it's not so bad that Grandma works with Ricky's mom.

JASON BRAX

Soccer practice is interrupted this afternoon when I get arrested.

Well, not really arrested. What happens is two cops show up and pull me off the field so I can give a statement. I think Coach Gifford is ready to make a big stink and stand up for my civil liberties or whatever. But I tell him it's okay and that this kind of thing happens all the time.

He gawks at me. "Seriously?"

It's divorce business. Since Mom and Dad can't stand each other and their lawyers are even worse, a lot of disagreements end up with somebody calling the police. There's never any crime. In fact, I always end up feeling bad for the cops, who hate being dragged into it. But they're the ones who have no choice but to respond to every complaint.

Today the problem turns out to be that Mom hired a private investigator to make sure Dad isn't hiding money from her. The thing is, she's paying the guy out of the special joint bank account they're only allowed to use for expenses that involve me, which is a no-no. And the most ridiculous part is there's no way Dad has any secret money stashed away. If he did, why would he be living in a crummy apartment three miles outside of town?

So I'm the one who has to explain all that to the police, which is sort of scary when you're a middle school kid. Plus I'm always nervous that my name is going to get back to Janelle's dad.

By the time the cops are done with me, practice is almost over, and I've barely worked up a sweat. If this divorce gets me kicked off the team, I'm going to be pretty mad. I'm pretty mad anyway. Half my teammates think I'm a juvenile delinquent—that's how often the cops come looking for me. I suppose I could set the record straight, but my messed-up family isn't anybody's business. My friends all know. And Janelle, of course. There are no secrets in a serious relationship. Well, just one, I guess—the fort. She can't know about that, because she might let it slip in front of her dad.

Even though I'm not that sweaty, I shower after practice, since I'm going straight to Janelle's house. I get dressed again, making sure that the box is still in the pocket of my jeans. There it is, wrapped with a ribbon that has the logo of a real jewelry store. It's a present for Janelle to make up for how little time we've been spending together lately. I've always wanted to get her something nice. The problem—with Mom and Dad sinking all our cash into lawyers—was no money. That changed when we started selling those fancy cutlery pieces from the fort. I took my share of the soup ladle and got Janelle a silver-plated locket on a chain. It's heart-shaped and really shiny. Plus, I glued in one of our famous goofy selfies. That way, even when we can't be together—like when I'm at the fort with the guys—we'll still be together in the locket.

I run all the way to Janelle's house. Sure, I gain back some

of the sweatiness I just washed off, but it's totally worth it. She loves the locket and puts it on right away.

"I'm never taking it off!" she promises.

My friends call me Romeo as a joke, but that's who I feel like right now.

Only—I'm super aware of my phone vibrating in my back pocket. I know it's the guys texting me from the fort. They're watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark* right now. I hate to miss it, but I owe Janelle this time. For sure, it won't look good if I take off right after giving her this great present. You have to make some sacrifices for having a girlfriend.

The phone keeps going off the whole time we're together. I'm dying to know what's happening at the fort, but I don't dare check my messages until Janelle excuses herself to go to the bathroom.

Twenty-nine new texts! I heard *Raiders* is a good movie, but this is ridiculous!

I scroll down, scanning messages at top speed. They never even started the movie. C.J. showed up at the fort, holding his side and groaning with pain. After school, he fell off his new hoverboard doing one of those crazy daredevil stunts of his, and the guys brought him straight to Emergency at Canaan General. Ricky's afraid he might have broken ribs. C.J.'s mom and stepdad met them there. They're waiting for the results of the X-rays.

Janelle comes up behind me. "Hey, I thought our deal was no phones when we're together."

Don't laugh—that really is kind of a semi-rule of our relationship. The guys give me such a hard time about it.

"Sorry," I tell her, "but my phone was going crazy, so I had to check it. Turns out C.J.'s in the hospital! He fell off his hoverboard doing one of his death-defiers, and now he might have broken ribs!"

I'm getting really worked up. She calms me down with a hand on my shoulder. "You should go over there, Jason."

"Yeah, but today is supposed to be our day—"

"I'm sure all your friends are there, and you should be too," she insists. "We'll have plenty of time to hang out together."

This isn't the first time that I've been thrilled that Janelle is my girlfriend. She just *gets* me. While everybody else gives me a hard time about my loud voice, according to her it's a *good* thing. She says I talk "like you're making your mark on the world." I love the sound of that!

Most important, she understands that my friends are a huge part of my life, especially with my parents splitting up.

"It's funny," she says. "I saw C.J. at school today, and he looked like something was wrong with him. He was bent over the water fountain, clutching his side. And when he walked away, he didn't really straighten up."

"That had to be something different," I tell her. "He didn't have the accident until after school. Maybe he just had a stomachache or something."

Like the kind you can get from eating forty-year-old ravioli, for instance. Then again, we've all been eating from the stash at the fort and nobody else has had a problem.

Weird.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

C.J. SCIUTTO

My ribs aren't broken, just bruised.

That's good news, I guess. You can't tell the difference from how much it hurts. I feel like my side just stopped a cannonball. It might be fine for Superman, but I'm not Superman.

The doctor tapes it up nice and tight, which feels a little better after it's done feeling ten times worse. After all my "death-defiers," I honestly believed that I'd seen everything pain could do to me. I stand corrected.

"You're all set," she tells me. "You might want to relax for a couple of days before going back to school. And be careful on that hoverboard. This could have been a lot worse."

From the other side of the exam room, Mom shoots me a searching look. She knows as well as I do that I didn't fall off a hoverboard onto a fire hydrant. It's kind of a secret the two of us share—one that's so secret that *we* don't even talk about it. It's just understood that neither of us is going to spill the beans to anybody. The doctors always have questions, but my cover stories are very believable. It's easy to make them focus on my daredevil career. Same with the teachers at school: When will I learn my lesson about dangerous sports? I'm not competing in the X Games, after all.

Nobody has a clue.

Lately, I've been wondering if maybe my mom would be better off if everybody knew.

When we step out into the waiting room, all the guys are there. It's been over three hours since they brought me here, and everybody stayed. We even picked up an extra—Jason, who must have blown off Janelle. I'm impressed. How often does Romeo dump Juliet to go sit in a hospital?

Marcus is with them. They look like kindergartners next to his six-foot-three-inch frame. I can't hear what everybody's saying, but I can tell that my stepfather is cracking jokes and they're lapping it up. Jason has a laugh like crashing thunder.

Mom notices my reaction. "Marcus can be a lot of fun."

"God protect me from having that much fun," I mumble.

Marcus gets emotional when he sees me. "Buddy, are you okay?" He actually chokes up. Nice touch.

I direct my answer to my friends. "You guys didn't have to wait here all this time."

Evan shrugs. "Like we've got something better to do."

Even Ricky stuck around to find out if I'm dead or alive, and he's still kind of an outsider.

"We're going to get C.J. home," Marcus tells the guys. "I promise I won't put him to work chopping firewood, or anything like that."

"Keep him away from the hoverboard," advises Mitchell.

It gets a nervous laugh, but not from me. Doctor's orders: I'm not supposed to laugh for at least a couple of days.

No sweat. Nothing about my life is very funny.

Our house is about a mile and a half from the hospital, but Marcus makes us drive all the way out to the mall so he can buy me a PlayStation. I already have a PlayStation—and an Xbox too—but this is the latest edition.

I don't want it because I don't need it—and especially because it comes from Marcus. If he shows up with a suitcase full of gold bars, I won't want that either.

That night, I have a dream: I'm riding my hoverboard along Sixth Street and I try to jump over a hydrant but come down on top of it instead. I wake up in a cold sweat, with my rib cage on fire. I grab the water bottle on my nightstand and drain it in three desperate gulps.

When my heavy breathing finally returns to normal, I ask myself: Why would I dream what I told everybody, but which never really happened? After all, I could have dreamed of a big fist, the size of a Christmas ham, aimed straight at my head. And when I duck out of the way, a vicious knee comes up and slams into my rib cage. That would have been more like it.

Then again, you can dream anything. A giant cloud can open up, sending a cascade of pinwheels sailing down to earth. But just before they hit the ground, they turn into kittens on tricycles and pedal away.

The next morning, I'm not allowed to go to school, but nobody said I have to stay home. The minute Mom and Marcus leave for work, I scramble into my clothes—*carefully*, because my side still hurts like crazy. Then I take the new PlayStation, which is still in the box, grab every cable within reach, and head for the woods. One thing the fort lacks is a little video gaming. That's what the cables are for—it's not going to be easy to hook up a modern console to a forty-year-old TV. But if I can't make it work, I'll bet Ricky can.

It's pretty painful to move around with my bruised ribs. So I take the hoverboard—ha-ha. It's the perfect ride—until I get to the woods. Now I'm walking again, carrying the PlayStation in one arm and the hoverboard in the other. And at the fort, when I have to open the heavy trapdoor by myself, it feels like my injured side is about to explode.

But I manage it. And I get myself and all my stuff down the ladder. When Bennett Delamere built this place, he obviously didn't think he'd get hurt in the nuclear attack he was expecting. An elevator would have been helpful—or maybe just a wheelchair ramp.

Not that I'm complaining. When I'm finally chilling on the couch, listening to a vinyl record by Pink Floyd from 1973, it's the first time since my bruised ribs that I'm truly relaxed. Who cares that half my body is throbbing with pain? I'm home.

After a short nap, I take a shot at setting up the PlayStation. It turns out to be easier than I thought—no Ricky required. There's no place to plug in the HDMI, obviously, but the red,

yellow, and white cables connect to an adapter that attaches to the back of the set by a screw. Very old-school.

I try it out. The graphics are lousy, but that's the TV, not the hookup. Maybe the next time Marcus owes me a present—and there *will* be a next time—I should push for a new monitor.

Then I consider the reason why Marcus will feel so generous, and that idea doesn't sound so funny. For at least the thousandth time, I remind myself of what's become almost a chant inside my head: I don't want *anything* from Marcus.

Besides, we don't need Marcus's money or anybody else's. We've got a great source of income right there in the kitchen drawers. We just have to convince Ricky to let us sell more of it. Come to think of it, considering he's the outsider, the guy has an awful lot to say around here.

I heat up a tin of corned beef hash for lunch—never had it before; pretty good—and settle in for an afternoon of gaming. The guys are going to love this! The combination of having your own place *and* video games is just about as perfect as life can be. Take it from someone who's seen the opposite of that.

I play *Call of Duty*, followed by *Halo*, and switch to *Madden* to get in some sports. That's risky, because raging won't be good for my bruised ribs, and I always rage when the ref makes bad calls. But I've barely made it out of the first quarter when I hear the clang of the trapdoor and the guys come climbing down the ladder.

Evan is horrified. "Dude—what are you doing here?"

I shoot him a dazzling smile. "I'm calling a safety blitz on third and three."

They stand there, gawking at me.

"Video games, man!" I explain, because they really don't get it. "I hooked up my spare PlayStation!"

"Why are you here at all?" Jason demands. "Yesterday at this time you were in the hospital!"

I give a half shrug on my non-injured side. "The doctor told me to stay home from school. Did you see me at school today?"

Mitchell spots the hoverboard leaning up against the metal wall by the ladder. "And you rode *that* thing? That's the reason you got killed in the first place!"

"I didn't get killed—"

"Not yet!" Mitchell exclaims, his voice rising in pitch. "But when it happens, I'm going to feel guilty for the rest of my life because maybe I broke a mirror or something!"

"Well, excuse me for forgetting that it's all about *you*," I retort.

Ricky perches on the edge of the couch. "What we're trying to say is we're worried about you. These death-defiers are getting more dangerous. And the fact that you can't take it easy for one single day after landing yourself in the hospital makes it that much scarier."

I'm annoyed. "Thanks for minding my business—random guy who, a month ago, none of us even knew existed!"

"No, he's right," Evan says quietly. "Coming here wasn't smart, C.J."

"Marcus told me to stay in bed all day. I never do what Marcus tells me."

"What have you got against Marcus?" Jason demands. "I've only got a dad part-time, Mitchell's got no dad at all, and who knows if Evan's ever going to see his folks again. Marcus is a great guy. You're lucky!"

I don't answer, because the last thing I want to do is drag my friends into a giant mess that they wouldn't be able to help with anyway. It's my problem, not theirs.

So I say, "I brought the PlayStation. You want me to take it back?"

That changes the conversation. Pretty soon, Jason and Mitchell have taken over my *Madden* game and the subject is dropped.

A few minutes after that, Marcus calls. The only reason I answer is because it's from our landline, so it might be my mother.

"Where are you, buddy? Mom's worried sick!"

If there's something I hate worse than being called *buddy* by Marcus, I don't know what it is. "I'm fine," I reply tersely. "I'll see her later." I put a little extra emphasis on *her*. I'll see him later too, but it isn't something I like to think about.

"Hey, that's not good enough!" he protests. "You can't just take off like that! Your mother was ready to call the police."

My voice is flat. "You're not going to call the police."

He knows that better than anyone, and so does Mom.

The last thing Marcus would want is the police nosing around our house.

CHAPTER TWELVE

RICKY MOLINA

In Harborfield, my old town, when I was accepted to the magnet school, it was a really big deal. We had a huge barbecue, and the whole neighborhood came. Some parents hugged me and others joked about how, one day, they were going to be working for me. A couple of the little kids even asked for my autograph.

Here, the guys call me Magnet-head, or Magnet-face, or just Magnets, like it's something to be ashamed of. Maybe it's Canaan, and the way things are around here. Harborfield isn't a rich place, but life in Canaan is pretty tough for a lot of families. They say most of the locals used to work at DelaCraft Auto Parts. But the plant has been through seven rounds of layoffs. That's what happened to Mitchell's mom, and now she's working three part-time jobs just to get by. At least that's the best I can figure out from what the other guys have said. Mitchell doesn't talk to me that much—except to tell me to get out of his face.

Not to pile on Mitchell—the kid has OCD and isn't great at school, and that can't be easy. When he gets hipped on something, you can't change his mind with dynamite. Whether it's his triskaidekaphobia or the time he was convinced that he

accidentally ate a live ladybug inside a can of chicken noodle soup that was sealed for over forty years, the guy's mind works in a different way. We're talking about a kid who has a secret garden somewhere that can only be watered in the middle of the night. Who knows what he's got growing there? Grudges, probably. He's good at that. Or maybe he buried a pebble and he's waiting for it to turn into a petrified forest.

Mitchell's the most extreme. But, to be honest, all the guys make it pretty clear that I'm the fifth wheel. Sixty years from now, we'll all be hanging around the retirement community, and I'll still be the new guy, who doesn't fit in because he went to a magnet retirement community before this one.

It's even worse at school. There, I'm in all eighth-grade classes, even though I'm a year younger—which is like wearing a sign on my head that screams MAGNETIZED! Like being smart is something I only do to make them look bad. Also, it turns out I'm in a seventh-grade homeroom with Jason's girlfriend, Janelle, and I have to be extra on guard with her. Lately, she's started asking questions about where Jason's been going when he can't be with her—questions I can't answer.

I'm in three classes with Evan, two with Jason and C.J., and none with Mitchell. C.J. might be the one who makes me most curious. Something's up with that guy, but I can't figure out what it is. There are times we'll be hanging out at the fort, and you just know that his mind is a thousand miles away. He's sort of the exception among the four guys, since money doesn't seem to be a problem in his family. While Mitchell struggles, Evan lives with his grandparents, and Jason's folks count nickels

to split up in the divorce, C.J. has so many PlayStations that he has one to spare. His bike: the best. His phone: top of the line. Ditto his laptop and tablet. He has skateboards, Rollerblades, hoverboards—you name it. He's got a great mom; a stepdad who spoils him. And yet, every now and then, I catch a look from him that I can only describe as desperate.

"Ever wonder what's going on in C.J.'s head?" I ask Evan one day.

"Mind your own business, Ricky," he tells me mildly. "There's nothing going on in his head. He's probably just dreaming up his next death-defier."

The death-defiers. If that's not desperation, what is?

I suppose there could be some other explanation. Maybe C.J.'s bored, because he gets everything he wants. Maybe he's just crying out for attention. Maybe he's honestly one of those danger-is-my-middle-name kind of people, like Evel Knievel, the motorcycle daredevil, or Philippe Petit, who tightrope walked between the twin towers of the old World Trade Center.

From what I've seen of Canaan, anything is possible.

I'm studying for the entrance exam to Freeport Area Magnet School. For a while, I went to the fort for peace and quiet, but I had to give that up. The guys just don't like it. How's that for a lose-lose? They hate it that I'm at *their* school, taking classes with *them*. But when I try to get *out* of their school, I'm a snob who thinks he's too smart for Canaan Middle.

So I study at home. I wear earplugs so I can't hear the baby screaming, and my mother singing lullabies, and my father begging for a little peace and quiet. That's because I'm using *his* earplugs. They actually work pretty well. I don't hear the first handful of gravel ricocheting off my window.

I'd probably never notice anything, except I happen to glance up in time to see a fresh load bouncing against the glass. Alarmed, I abandon my algebra book and rush over. We just got this window replaced after the hurricane launched that branch through the old one. Mom and Dad will freak if it gets broken.

I peer out over the front lawn. Is that *Evan* waving up at me at ten o'clock at night? It seems pretty late for him to walk all the way over here in the pitch-dark. I blink. No—too tall, and with a sparse, patchy beard on his cheeks. That's not Evan; it's his brother, Luke. I spot the tomato-red Mustang parked at the curb. Sure enough, leaning against a tree a few yards behind Luke is Jaeger. I'm not sure where he got my address—probably from Evan's grandmother, who works with Mom. I wish they didn't know where I live. That guy Jaeger rubs me the wrong way.

I open the window, but I still can't hear what Luke is saying. Oh yeah—the earplugs. I pull them out and drop them on the sill.

"Come out here," Luke calls. "We want to talk to you."

The last thing I'm interested in is one-on-one time with Luke and Jaeger under cover of darkness. "I can't," I reply. "I'm not allowed out this late."

"Don't be a wuss!" Luke scoffs. "Get down here!"

Luke's not very persuasive, but Jaeger is another story. Wordlessly, he reaches down, picks up a rock the size of a cantaloupe, and hefts it in his hand like he's about to heave it through my window.

"Wait!" I blurt. "I'm coming out."

On the way down, I make a point of stepping into the den to make sure my dad knows that I'm going outside to speak with some "friends" who happened to stop by.

Dad frowns. "At this hour?"

I shrug. "It's Evan Donnelly's brother. He's older."

Before Dad can ask any more questions, I'm out the door.

"Now, was that so hard?" Jaeger's mellow voice greets me when I walk outside.

I stay on the front porch. "What do you guys want with me?"

Jaeger raises both hands in a gesture of innocence. "Don't bug. We just want to pick your brain a little."

"About what?"

"What have you idiots got going on in the woods?" Luke demands.

"The woods?" It takes some work to sound natural. "Nothing."

"Don't give me that!" Luke snaps. "Every time we see one of you, you're either walking into the woods, coming out of the woods, or standing around waiting for each other at the edge of the woods. What's so great about trees that five kids can't stay away?"

I hesitate. My first instinct is to deny everything. But from what I've seen, Luke and Jaeger spend ninety percent of their time cruising around town in that tomato-mobile. So they're probably not lying when they say they've noticed a lot of coming and going around the woods.

I shrug. "The weather's not going to stay warm forever. So we're hanging outside while we still can."

Jaeger casts a look that cuts right through me. "Word is you're a smart kid—too smart to think you can palm me off with a story like that. Oh, sure, you're all communing with nature. Birds tweeting, the sweet smell of pine. Gotcha. So where's the cash coming from?"

"Cash? What cash?"

"There was a fifty-dollar bill in my brother's jeans yesterday," Luke chimes in. "He says he found it on the street. Believe me, in my family we're not that lucky. Anyway, who drops fifty bucks in this town?"

"Seems like all five of you are pretty flush these days," Jaeger adds in that drawl of his. "Worthless getting his phone fixed—everyone knows that kid and his mom don't have two pennies to rub together."

"Yeah, but—"

"And my brother is suddenly not hungry at dinner anymore," Luke goes on. "He could eat a leg off the table. He's snacking someplace else. And paying for it how?"

My mind races. I have perfectly good answers to their questions—just not answers I can give. The extra money is courtesy of T.K. Pawn and Checks Cashed, from selling

Bennett Delamere's silver cutlery. The unexplained eating comes from the stash of forty-year-old canned goods. As for the reason we're spending so much time in the woods—that's the simplest answer of all. No one is allowed to know about the fort, especially not these two.

I'm stuck. I can't tell them the truth, but they've seen too much. They know something is going on. You can't lie to Jaeger—he has a built-in polygraph machine that will trip you up every time. Evan says he's a dropout, but he really does belong in a magnet school. He's smart—and I mean that in the worst possible way.

I hear my father's voice behind me. "What are you fellas talking about?"

I love my old man, but at this moment, it goes double.

"Luke's just picking up some homework for his kid brother," Jaeger supplies smoothly. "They're in the same class at school."

Dad looks from hand to hand to hand. No homework. "Well, I guess that's already done. Good night, guys. Come on, Ricky. It's getting late."

"Yeah, we should be going too. Nice to meet you, Mr. Molina. Ricky, we'll see you soon."

Once we're back inside, Dad looks me straight in the eye. "Are they bothering you, Ricky? I know Evan's a nice boy, but the brother and his friend seem a little sketchy."

Understatement. If you check *sketchy* in the dictionary, there's probably a picture of Jaeger.

But I can't say anything to Dad. There's no way that conversation wouldn't eventually lead to the fort.

For the rest of the night, Jaeger's words resound in my head: *We'll see you soon*. It sounds like a promise.

I've got to tell the guys that Luke and Jaeger are watching us. I may be an outsider in every other way. But in defending the fort, I'm one hundred percent *in*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EVAN DONNELLY

I'm not surprised to learn that Luke and Jaeger have been watching us. Those two watch everybody in town. They spend their days driving around Canaan in the Mustang, looking for things they can steal and other ways to make a quick buck—like their little plan to get into the cash register at Doyle's. No wonder Jaeger washed out of high school and Luke's working on a grade-point average of D-minus-minus.

But the stakes are higher now because we've got the fort. We can't let Luke and Jaeger find out about it—and not just because they'd give us the boot and claim it for themselves. We've already seen how valuable that silver cutlery is. Ricky says the china bowls and plates might be worth even more. Besides pizza and snacks, we've only been using the cash for necessities—Mitchell's phone repair, a bike helmet for C.J., a sleeping mask for Jason, since his dad's new apartment doesn't have blinds yet. I picked up a small lockbox for myself so Luke can't steal my money anymore—although when I asked him about the missing fifty, he claimed he didn't have it. I'll bet he doesn't. The minute he swiped it, I'm sure it went straight to Jaeger.

The thing is, if Luke and Jaeger got their hands on the fort,

they'd sell all that stuff on day one. And the cash would disappear just the way my family's money always disappeared—right before Mom and Dad would land in rehab. That's the worst part about Luke being friends with Jaeger. Not that the guy's a jerk, but that he seems to be dragging my brother down the same awful path as our parents.

"So what we need," Ricky decides at our meeting at the fort, "is security."

"Security?" Mitchell repeats. "We're just kids! What kind of security can we have?"

"Mitchell," I urge. "Hear the kid out. Ricky's never steered us wrong before."

First, we march the perimeter of the small clearing around the entrance to the fort. Ricky selects a tree—not too tall, but with low, sturdy branches, almost like the rungs of a ladder. "This is our lookout tree," he explains. "Every time you enter the fort, you check here first. Climb up ten or twelve feet. If anybody else is around—nature hikers, walkers on the trail—lie low until the coast is clear."

Next, we go back to the fort and take turns closing the trapdoor over our heads while pulling our cover of branches on top of it. It's a lot harder than it looks. You have to hold the heavy iron hatch open a crack with your left hand while pulling the camouflage into place with your right. Mitchell slams the door on his arm a couple of times, popping off with a string of curses he normally saves for the hated Dr. Breckinridge.

"Nobody noticed this place for forty years," C.J. points out. "Why do we have to start being so paranoid now?"

I have the answer to that. "Nobody noticed because the trapdoor was covered in dirt. Once the hurricane washed it clean, we found the fort the very next day. And if Luke and Jaeger start nosing around, they'll see it too. They've already figured out we've got something going on in the woods."

Speaking of Luke, Ricky comes up with an ingenious way for me to follow his movements. Since both our phones are on the same plan, he sets up the Find My app to track my brother's location. If Luke is close by, I'll be able to see it right on my screen. And wherever Luke is, Jaeger's usually not far away.

"It'll also come in handy when we go to the pawnshop," Ricky adds. "If those guys catch us hawking cutlery, they'll want to know where it came from. Now we can make sure Luke's nowhere near T.K. before we head over there."

Communication is also part of the new security plan. Since Mitchell's phone is back up and running, we create a five-way group chat about fort status: who's there, who's on the way, and anything unusual that the others should know about.

"Only we can't call it the fort," Ricky tells us.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Too risky. If Luke gets a look at your screen and sees us talking about a fort, he'll know we've got one. We need a code name."

"What kind of code name?" Jason asks.

"Doesn't matter," Ricky replies. "Just so long as it sounds nothing like any kind of fort. In fact, the perfect name would be the total opposite of a fort."

Almost immediately, Mitchell says, "Peru."

I'm blown away. "Why Peru?"

"The fort is the greatest thing in the world," Mitchell reasons. "So the opposite of that is the worst thing in the world, which is lima beans. And Lima is the capital of Peru."

Only in Mitchell's mind can that make sense. It's the perfect code—because no one else in the world thinks like Mitchell.

That's how the fort becomes Peru.

Ricky has one more job for us—a decoy fort.

"Sooner or later," he explains, "Luke and Jaeger are going to drag themselves out of the car and come looking for us in the woods. It would be pretty hard for them to stumble on the real fort—but not impossible. Let's give them something a lot easier to find, so they'll stop looking."

"If you're expecting me to dig another fort, you can forget it," C.J. puts in.

Ricky shakes his head. "It doesn't have to be *good*. It just has to look like some lame clubhouse. They think we're up to something. Let's show them we're not."

"How about the *original* fort," Jason suggests. "The one that got wrecked by the hurricane?"

Ricky shakes his head. "Too close. We don't want anybody nosing around this part of the woods."

That becomes our field trip for the afternoon—searching out a good spot for our fake fort. We follow the trails all through the woods until C.J. starts complaining that his semi-healed ribs are beginning to hurt again. He sits down on a broad flat rock just in from the path, and that's when it comes

to me. The rock is large and round, like a tabletop. We clear away the brush around it and drag over five "seats"—pieces of a tree trunk someone sliced up with a chain saw. We step back and admire our handiwork. It looks like the most natural meeting place in the world.

"All that's missing is King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table," C.J. marvels.

Mitchell selects a stump and settles onto it with a satisfied sigh. "This is my spot."

"You don't have a spot," Ricky informs him. "None of us do. It's just a decoy."

"Well, this is my decoy spot," Mitchell insists.

We stomp around on the grass and weeds to make the area look lived in. To complete the effect, we leave the woods and pick up a few soda cans and water bottles from the first trash can we find. Then back to our decoy fort to spread our litter around the table.

"You ruined it," Mitchell pronounces darkly.

"We'll have to come back every few days with fresh garbage," Ricky comments. "Because this stuff's going to blow away eventually."

Jason looks stricken. "Janelle's not going to like this. She's president of the seventh-grade environmentalism club."

"That's no problem," C.J. retorts, "because Janelle's not going to hear a single word about it. Right, Romeo?"

"At least Janelle doesn't order everybody around," Jason mutters with a stink eye in Ricky's direction.

He's got a point. Ricky really has taken over a little. But I

can't say it bothers me as much as it does the others. I've seen how easily Jaeger took over my brother. He's like a cockroach infestation—once the first few bugs get in, pretty soon they're everywhere.

If Luke and Jaeger ever find our fort, we're out.

"Hey, little bro." The silky voice that greets me when I get home that afternoon definitely doesn't belong to Luke. "Long time no see."

Jaeger is in our living room, draped over Grandpa's favorite chair, eating a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey off a pocketknife blade that looks a little too long to be legal.

"Luke?" I call. "Where are Grandma and Grandpa?"

Luke wanders out of the kitchen, eating a banana, monkey-style. "How should I know? What do you care? They'll be back."

"Isn't that what you said about your parents?" Jaeger drawls.

Man, I hate that guy! He doesn't just use that knife to eat ice cream. He also jams it in your back and twists it every chance he gets.

Something in Luke's eyes flashes just for a second—a spark of anger. But he's not going to turn against Jaeger. A twisted grin is forced onto his lips, and he even manages a chuckle. "My parents. Yeah, that's funny."

"I don't think it's funny," I say between clenched teeth.

"Give it a minute," Jaeger assures me. "It'll come to you."

"Get a sense of humor, Evan," Luke advises me.

There is no humor where our parents are concerned. Luke knows that even better than I do. They raised him four years longer before they took off on us.

"You've been making yourself pretty scarce, little bro," Jaeger comments, frowning at me.

"I'm not your bro."

"Ever since you bailed on us at Doyle's," Luke puts in.

"Yeah, well, you stole my fifty bucks, so we're even," I retort.

"Lot more than fifty in that cash register," Jaeger says. I guess I look scared, because he adds, "Don't stress. You can owe me the difference. No biggie."

"I don't owe you squat!"

In answer, Jaeger gets up and slouches to the fireplace, where Grandma keeps her prize collection of ceramic dolls. He raises the ice cream pint to his lips, slurps what's left, and drops the empty container upside down on the mantel, covering the figurine of a ballet dancer.

"Leave those alone!" I snap.

It's the wrong thing to say to a guy like Jaeger.

"You're the boss." He uses the pocketknife to sweep the upturned container off the mantel. The doll drops to the stone hearth, where it shatters into a million pieces.

Even Luke is a little shocked by that. "Hey—my grandmother collects those things!"

"Chill."

"Yeah, but—"

Jaeger silences him by positioning the pocketknife blade behind the next doll on the shelf. The threat is clear. Every single piece in Grandma's collection can be lying in shards on the hearth. There's nothing we can do to stop it. All the power is Jaeger's.

"You better not!" I warn.

"Or what?" Jaeger seems genuinely intrigued. "I'm all ears."

"Or I'll call the cops!"

"Go ahead," Jaeger challenges. "I can't wait to hear you explain why you and your loser friends are suddenly flush with cash."

That shuts me up in a heartbeat. I want to protect Grandma's collection, but nothing is more important than keeping the secret of the fort. I made a promise to the guys. I even signed it—in a circle!

The giant engine of Grandpa's ancient car never sounded so good to me. A moment later, a key in the lock is even sweeter.

The pocketknife is gone from Jaeger's hand. He steps away from the fireplace as my grandparents enter the house, carrying grocery bags.

Jaeger rushes forward and tries to relieve Grandma of the heavy parcels. "Let me help you with those, Mrs. Donnelly."

My grandmother's face turns to stone. "I can manage."

It's weird: Jaeger—who would flip off the president in front of the entire Secret Service and never give a hoot about it—really wants to win over Grandma. Maybe it's because she really, truly can't stand him. Excellent judge of character, my

grandmother. She watched her son and daughter-in-law go bad, and she sees the same thing starting to happen to Luke. Which means Jaeger will have her approval when whales learn to tap dance.

"Well, I'm out of here," Jaeger says cheerfully. "Wonderful to see you, Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly."

If he's waiting for a "Nice to see you too," he'll wait a long time. Grandpa doesn't like him much either.

Grandma sets her parcel down on the hall table and walks toward the fireplace. "What happened here?" She kneels down and sifts through the wreckage of the ceramic ballet dancer on the hearth.

I'm ready to rat Jaeger out, but then I catch an imploring look from Luke. Well, forget it, brother. I'm not going to lie to protect such a jerk. But then it comes to me: This isn't *loyalty* to Jaeger. It's fear. Grandma despises Jaeger enough to call the police over something like this. And Jaeger would never take that lying down. He'd go for revenge—on Luke, on me, on our house, maybe even on Grandma.

I step forward. "I did it. We were"—what's that word Grandma always uses—"roughhousing."

"It's my fault too," Luke puts in. "We'll save up and buy you a new one."

Grandma regards us intently. "Thank you. And be more careful next time."

"We will," I promise.

And just like that, the crisis is over. It probably wasn't much

of a crisis to begin with. For one of Grandma's precious ceramic dolls, we got off pretty easy. Or maybe Grandma isn't so clueless after all.

It hits me: This is the first time since I don't know when that Luke and I have acted like real brothers.

Come to think of it, I know exactly when: since he started hanging out with Jaeger.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

C.J. SCIUTTO

Mom can't let go of the idea of us and Marcus being a real family. She thinks that picnics and barbecues and weekend trips will make Marcus and me into a father and son.

Like this Sunday, when Mom gets us hockey tickets, and we waste a whole day driving to Raleigh for the Hurricanes' game against Toronto. That's a hundred-mile drive each way, when I could be in the fort, watching *Earthquake* with the guys. Maybe he was lousy at running an auto parts factory, but Bennett Delamere sure had great taste in disaster movies from the seventies. He has them all—*Airport*, *The Towering Inferno*, *The Hindenburg*, *The Swarm*, *Meteor*. I guess it makes sense, since he built his fallout shelter because he was preparing for the ultimate disaster—World War III.

The only thing better than the movies themselves is when Mitchell tries to pretend he's not scared watching them. Compare that to hours in the car with Marcus, never knowing which traffic jam or speed trap or obnoxious bumper sticker is going to set him off.

Actually, Marcus is in a great mood today. He grew up in Minnesota, so he loves hockey. As we cruise down the interstate, he's chattering excitedly behind the wheel. Every now

and then, my mother turns to me in the back seat and enthuses, "Isn't this fun?"

I think she's trying to convince herself.

"Yeah, fun," I mumble.

Days like this always put me in a tough spot. On the one hand, I hate to disappoint Mom, when it's so important to her that we all get along. But that would violate my personal policy toward Marcus, which is this: I hate his guts. Not only that, but I refuse to admit that he even exists. As far as I'm concerned, we're driving along the highway with nobody at the wheel.

We finally get to the PNC Arena, and the first thing Marcus does is exchange the tickets for better seats.

"Nothing but the best for my family!" he declares, tickled pink with himself.

Mom looks a little less thrilled about that. Those new tickets cost a lot more than the ones she bought. And we're not rich, no matter how much Marcus likes to splash money around to prove what a great guy his is. (Barf.)

Her mood improves when we get to the seats, which really are awesome—center ice, twelve rows up. When you live in a dumpy town like Canaan, you don't get a lot of chances to watch big league sports live, so that's cool, I guess. But Mom makes me sit next to Marcus. She's determined that the two of us should bond—fat chance.

The disaster almost happens during the second intermission. Marcus gets us hot dogs, and it turns out that Marcus's has regular mustard instead of hot mustard.

My stepfather leaps to his feet, scouring the arena for the vendor who committed such a crime.

It's a nothing thing, but Mom knows better than anybody how explosive a situation like this can be. She stands up next to her husband, her hands on his shoulders. "Don't worry. I'll go to the concessions and get you another."

He bats her arms away. "If that *moron* did his *job*, you wouldn't have to!"

This is how it always goes with Marcus. It starts with the wrong mustard on a hot dog, a scuff on a new sneaker, a confusing software update on his phone—something so small that by the time it's all over, you don't even remember what set it off. But while it's going on, it's pretty memorable.

We get lucky, though. At that moment, the teams come back on the ice for the third period, and Marcus forgets about the mustard. Mom shoots me a goofy grin as if to say: *Now, wasn't that silly?* But it wasn't silly, and she knows it. If things had gone just a little differently, it would have been serious as a train wreck.

Carolina wins 4–2, and Marcus is pretty thrilled about that. Everyone's all smiles until we get to the parking lot, and Marcus can't remember if our car is in 27-G or 27-J. So we pick G, and it's not there. And when it isn't in J either, he's getting pretty steamed. By now, most of the fans have found their vehicles and gone home, but we're wandering around an eighty percent empty lot, listening to Marcus fume.

At this point, I remember it wasn't 27-anything; it was 17-K. So back we go. And when the car turns out to be there,

Marcus gets very quiet. Classic Marcus. He's quiet—until he isn't anymore.

"Why doesn't anybody remember anything?!" he erupts. "Why does it all fall to me?"

"Marcus, please—" Mom begins, and that's when it happens.

He reaches out, grabs a fistful of my mother's hair, and literally lifts her almost off her feet.

Even though I knew from the start that the blowup would be coming, I'm still shocked. "Let her go!" I shout. "Let her go!"

But he doesn't, and there's no one close enough to hear me yelling. Desperately, I pop the trunk of the car, pull out a tire iron, and cock it back like a baseball bat. "Let her go or I'll use this!"

"C.J., put that away!" Mom cries.

How crazy is that? She's hanging there like a side of beef on a hook, pleading with *me* to step it down.

It's so ridiculous that even Marcus notices it. "All right. Cool it." He sets my mother back on her feet and helps her into the car, like he's the greatest gentleman in history.

I replace the tire iron in the trunk and head for the back seat.

Marcus, deadly calm, reaches out and slaps me so hard across the face that I see stars. I stagger into the side mirror, opening a cut in front of my ear.

Mom is in the passenger seat, staring into her shoes. I don't think she noticed. If she did, she doesn't say anything. Either way, I don't make a big deal out of it. I just scramble into the back and lie down.

We drive in silence for about ten minutes before the rhythmic weeping sounds start to come from Marcus. His whole body shudders as he hangs on to the wheel like a drowning sailor clinging to a life preserver. And just like everything about him is oversize, gigantic tears are pouring down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry!" he sobs. "I didn't mean it! I just love you guys so much! I wanted today to be a great day, and I blew it! I'm a bad person . . . !"

"You're not a bad person," Mom soothes beside him. "You're a good man and a wonderful father. And today was a great day—a fun day! We loved it!"

I can practically script it: Marcus crying and apologizing and calling himself every kind of monster in the book, and my mother telling him he's wrong and what a fine person he is. I never know what I hate worse—wild-man Marcus or Marcus blubbering apologies; Mom under attack or Mom consoling her attacker; me getting smacked around or me keeping my mouth shut because that's the way Mom wants it.

About forty-five minutes into the drive, Mom has finally built Marcus back up to the point where he can stop apologizing and start promising that it'll never happen again. It was temporary insanity, a one-time thing.

Some one-time thing. By my tally, it's more like thirty and counting. I sit up and note that the bleeding is tapering off. Good. No emergency room visit.

I crane my neck and examine the wound in the rearview mirror. There's a jagged, oozing cut at the top of my cheek, about an inch in from my ear. Plus the bruise, which is coming in purple.

It's going to take some creative thinking to come up with a good death-defier to explain this injury to the guys. The new bike helmet would normally cover this spot, so I'll need an excuse for why I forgot to wear it. My friends aren't hard to convince, but Ricky is a suspicious type. I don't think he fully bought my story about how I got the bruised ribs. I have to be extra careful around him.

When we get home, Marcus and Mom are holding hands as they start up the walk to the front door. The sight of my gashed and swelling face seems to shock her—like she's already forgotten the incident in the parking lot.

Well, it happened, Mom, just like all the other times.

And the times still to come.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MITCHELL WORTH

I don't tell the guys that I like our decoy fort almost as much as the real one.

They already think I'm weird. Maybe they're right. Oh, sure, I know the real fort is better. There's no TV here, or old movies and music. There isn't any food, and for sure there's no solid silver cutlery that turns out to be worth a lot of money. Plus, it isn't underground, so if it storms, you're going to get soaked.

I don't care about stuff like that. It sort of speaks to me here. It isn't fancy—not like something a millionaire would build. But it didn't have to be built at all. It was already here. The rock table is flat, and nice and smooth. I already have my own spot—a stone that's perfectly molded to the shape of my butt. It's peaceful. And it's a great place to take apart pine cones and see how many seeds are inside. Like ninety-two—which is awesome, because it isn't a multiple of you-know-what. (Ninety-one is seven times thirteen, but it's impossible for a pine cone to grow exactly ninety-one seeds, since each scale has two.)

I like to come here on weekend mornings, when Mom works the seven a.m. shift and it's still too early for any of the

guys to be at the real fort. I break up the cones very carefully, one scale at a time, and spread the seeds out on the rock table. It makes me feel like a scientist. And if that doesn't sound all that cool, you have to remember that doing things that feel smart are really important to me. For example, I know that when I'm old, there are going to be a lot of pine trees in this area, because I always let the seeds blow away when I'm finished counting. They have these built-in wings, so they really take off on the breeze.

"Isn't that Mitchell?" comes a girl's voice.

I look up just as a puff of wind picks up half my seeds and sends them spinning away.

Jason and Janelle stand on the path at the edge of the clearing. Jason's one of my best friends, so I'm always glad to see him. I'm just not glad to see him *now*, when I'm in the middle of my personal thing, which maybe he and the other guys will think is stupid.

"What are you doing here?" Jason and I chorus in perfect unison.

The wind takes a few more seeds. One of them almost goes up my nose.

"We're having a picnic brunch," Janelle announces brightly. "There's plenty for three."

She has an actual picnic basket, just like in picture books for little kids. I've never seen one in real life before. When Mom and I go on a picnic, we brown-bag it. Not that we do anything very often—she's always working.

Janelle spreads a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth across

my rock, covering who knows how many seeds. If it turns out to be thirteen, we're all going to get salmonella. You can die from that.

"You promised not to bring her here!" I hiss as Janelle sets out mini bagels and a container of cream cheese.

"Here's okay," Jason defends himself in a whisper. "This isn't—you know—*Peru*."

Janelle laughs. "You guys are hilarious. This isn't Peru. It isn't Mars either. Come eat."

It isn't my picnic, but it's nice of them to include me. So I have a mini bagel. And a glass of orange juice—at home we buy the cheap off-brand stuff, which is too watery, so it's nice to get a taste of the real thing.

I'm having a pretty good time. The only problem is Jason, who keeps catching my eye and giving me a toss of the head in the direction of the trail. Just like us guys want Jason to keep his love life separate from guy stuff, he doesn't want friends crowding in on their dates. It serves him right for bringing his girlfriend to our decoy fort, but obviously, there's no way to explain that with Janelle sitting right here. I help myself to a second bagel and put strawberry jam on this one, so it's like dessert. I bet Jason wants to kick me under the table—only our table is solid rock.

Eventually, even Janelle looks like she wants me to scram, so I get up. "Thanks for the bagels."

"Sure thing." Janelle beams. I don't really know her that well, but she's super nice, and her taste in orange juice is top notch. Jason doesn't say anything.

I start for the path, and suddenly, I'm backing up, because two tall teenagers step out of the trees, advancing on the decoy fort. Luke and Jaeger.

"Sweet little setup you've got here, Worthless." Jaeger looks around with an appraiser's eye, which comes to rest on the picnic basket and the tablecloth. "And you saved me a bagel!" He perches on the edge of the rock and helps himself to a mini bagel, taking a gigantic bite.

On the one hand, I'm horrified that these two jerks have found my special spot. On the other, we created the place to do just exactly this—to be a decoy fort so Luke and Jaeger won't look for the real one. And here they are—decoyed. Ricky may be annoying, but he sure was right about this!

"Hey, that's not yours!" Jason exclaims angrily.

"Not very neighborly," Jaeger complains, still chewing. He leans over the table, far too close to Janelle. "I don't think we've been introduced."

"She's *Officer Jaworski's daughter*," Luke supplies in a strangled voice.

Jaeger straightens up like he's been burned. "No kidding. Say hi to your old man for me."

I have to hand it to Janelle. Jaeger's a pretty scary guy, but she's totally calm as she pulls out her phone. "You can say hi to him yourself."

"Sorry," Jaeger mumbles. "Gotta run."

"When you see my brother," Luke adds, "tell him we love the new place."

There's normally a slow, lazy roll to Jaeger's walk, but he and Luke are moving pretty fast when they hit the trail.

"I don't think we should tell Evan that," I comment once they're gone.

Janelle frowns. "I know Evan's brother, but who's that other guy? He creeps me out."

"Jaeger Devlin," Jason supplies. "He creeps everybody out."

"Are they hassling you?" she asks. "Do you want me to mention something to my dad?"

"We can handle ourselves," Jason replies bravely.

No, we can't! I scream inside my head. What could be better than the cops locking up Jaeger and throwing away the key?

But on second thought, Jason's probably not just trying to look tough for his girlfriend. We don't want the Canaan Police Department nosing around our lives.

Pretty soon, he's trying to get rid of me again. "Well, I guess you're anxious to go to—you know—that thing."

"What thing?" I ask, misunderstanding on purpose.

Janelle bails me out. "Maybe you should stay a little longer. You don't want to run into those two in the woods."

So I stick around another twenty minutes—mostly because I'm kind of enjoying how much it ticks off Jason. And the madder he gets, the nicer Janelle is to me. She even gives me a fresh glass of orange juice. It's delicious—not too much gross pulp.

Eventually, the coast is clear and I've had so much juice that I have to go to the bathroom—which means the real fort. I say my goodbyes, post *Heading to Peru* on the group chat,

and move as silently as possible along the trails, making sure nobody's following me.

My first stop isn't the trapdoor; it's the lookout tree. I climb up and do a 360 of the woods. I wait until I'm positive that those two jerks are nowhere in the area before I go anywhere near the fort.

Swiftly—the way we practiced—I let myself in, pulling the cover of branches back over the steel hatch before it closes.

The light's already on. "Hello?" I call.

"What's up?" comes the reply. C.J.

I jump down and walk into the living area. "You messed up," I tell him.

His eyebrows arch. "How?"

"I texted I was coming. You're supposed to answer you're already here." Part of my OCD is it really gets to me when people don't follow the rules—even when those rules were made up by Ricky.

"I guess I dozed off. I didn't see your message."

He kind of has bedhead, so that makes sense. He also has a deep cut and a colorful bruise on the side of his face. "What happened to you? Not another death-defier?"

He shrugs. "Pogo-stick accident. This branch came up under my helmet."

"I thought you went to the hockey game yesterday."

"This was after we got back," he informs me. "I needed to get some exercise after all that car time."

"Romeo and Janelle are picnicking at the decoy fort," I tell him. "And guess who showed up? Luke and Jaeger."

He sits forward. "They're after us, all right. We've been cashing in too much silver, and they smell money."

That makes my stomach hurt. I've been meaning to ask the guys if we could sell an extra teaspoon or whatever so I can buy my mother a present. Because she works so much, she really depends on her morning coffee. And I've got my eye on this mug that says WORLD'S GREATEST MOM—which she is, even though she doesn't have a lot of time for me. It costs fifteen bucks, which is more than I can afford. But that's chicken feed compared to what Bennett Delamere's silverware is worth.

I know it's selfish, because it's totally for me. But I honestly can't remember the last time my mother got something nice, a surprise. The only other surprises she gets are when the bills come—and those surprises are never happy. Plus my report cards, which are even less happy.

Besides, all the guys have bought things with the money we've gotten from T.K. Pawn and Checks Cashed—except maybe C.J., who gets everything he could ever want from Marcus. And even C.J. eats his share of the pizza and nachos and wings and snacks we bring in.

But now, with Luke and Jaeger circling like vultures, any extra spending is just going to have to wait—including Mom's present. It stinks that the things we do to make our fort the best place in the world are putting the fort in danger.

What's the point of having the best place in the world if you can't do the things that make it great?

What I love about the weekend—besides no school—is spending the whole day at the fort with the guys. It's a blur of video games, old records, and collecting wildflowers to throw at Jason when he's done with his Janelle date. (Because romance.) Turns out we ambush Ricky by mistake, and he starts sneezing from allergies. That's pretty funny. And we do it all again when Jason finally does show up.

We watch movies till dinner. (Did you know *The Exorcist* has nothing to do with exercising?) I end up leaving with Ricky. He bugs me, but he's definitely better than nobody when it comes to finding my way out of the woods in the dark.

"Hey," Ricky says once we hit the sidewalk, "isn't your house *this* way?"

"I have to go water my plants," I tell him.

"What's that about?" he demands. "What plants? And why do they have to be watered in the middle of the night?"

I give him a stony stare. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

He raises both hands in a gesture of surrender. "Sorry, man. You don't have to take it personally. I'm honestly curious."

"You're the guy in magnet school. Figure it out."

As I walk away, I'm picturing Ricky solving the great mysteries of my life, using algebra or whatever. If he's as smart as the other guys say he is, maybe he knows how to get Mom rehired at DelaCraft Auto Parts. That would be a good use for his intelligence, instead of just making the rest of us feel stupid.

Mom is still at the restaurant she works at for her third job. But that's okay, since I have responsibilities too.

The house is in Canaan Estates, which is a nicer part of

town than the one I live in. All the homes are two-story, with big yards, fancy landscaping, and outdoor spotlights, which make everything look kind of like Hollywood. The whole neighborhood is full of places just like that. But my destination is the tall brick one with the sign on the path that says

EDWARD H. BRECKINRIDGE, MD, PHD
DOCTOR OF PSYCHIATRY

Dr. Breckinridge, my therapist. My *ex*-therapist, who dropped me as a patient the minute our health insurance was cut off.

I remember sitting in his office, listening to him brag about his amazing herb garden, which he loves so much and cares about more than his patients. That's around the back, behind a wooden gate that's always locked, so I have to climb over the fence.

I come down right in the middle of the doctor's pride and joy. You can't miss it, because of the strong herbal scent coming from his plants. According to the seed packages stapled to little tongue depressors, he's growing parsley, mint, sage, thyme, basil, rosemary, and coriander.

I check the window to make sure nobody's watching. I'm trespassing and, mostly, I'm shy. You see, when I water my plants, I don't use real water.

There's no polite way to explain it except by saying it outright: I've been peeing on Dr. Breckinridge's precious herb garden ever since he became my ex-doctor. I'm not proud of it,

but I'm not ashamed of it either. It serves him right. I even drink extra soda and juice to make sure I've got enough to cover the whole garden. That's my OCD talking. A psychiatrist—even a lousy one, like Dr. Breckinridge—should understand that better than anyone.

Then, when everything is completely watered, I leave. I smile all the way home, because I know I've accomplished something important.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

C.J. SCIUTTO

When I hear my phone alarm in the morning, it's always the same. I twist over to hit snooze, but since I'm on a couch, not a bed, I roll off the edge and hit the floor like a sack of oats. Even though it's a shock, it gets the job done. I'm wide awake now.

I look around, blinking. No familiar wooden furniture in the style of the old west. No posters all around. Instead, close metal walls. Old-fashioned TV. Mini kitchen.

The fort. I slept at the fort. Again.

I check my phone. Forty-one missed calls. Enough new texts to fill a novel. What would I do without Do Not Disturb mode?

I sift through the messages. Mom and Marcus. Marcus and Mom. *Where ru? When ru coming home?*

You can see the tension ratcheting upward as it gets later and later and there's still no word from me.

10:45 p.m. From Marcus: *Please, buddy—Mom's freaking out!*

12:02 a.m. From Mom: *Why ru doing this?*

It bothers me, because my mother knows the answer to that question. I'm doing this because my scrapes and bumps and bruised ribs have nothing to do with bike jumps or skateboard

stunts or death-defiers. They come from the man who became my stepfather when she married him.

Just the thought of Marcus makes my entire body swell with anger, until it feels like I should be able to level the whole town just by channeling the energy and shooting it out my finger. Then, a split second later, the power deserts me and I slump back onto the couch, wracked with guilt. Mom is all alone with *him*! I'm the one who should be protecting her. And where am I?

Cowering in the fort, hiding in a hole in the ground. If that's not cowardly, what is?

Anyway, Mom must be on her way to work by now, so she's safe from Marcus for at least the next few hours. I'd better get moving if I want to get to school on time. Yeah, school—I'm still going, even though I'm not sleeping at home anymore. I don't know why. I could definitely never explain it to Mitchell, who hates school more than any fifty kids alive. Maybe it's because I want to keep one thing in my life that's actually normal. Besides, if I stop showing up at school, the guys will definitely notice—and I don't want to have to explain the whole ugly business of what's going on at our house.

I let myself out of the fort, careful to replace the camouflage over the trapdoor. As much as I hate the reason I'm spending my nights in Bennett Delamere's bomb shelter, I can't escape a rush of freedom and exhilaration. There's something awesome about living on your own, with no parents and no rules. You don't have to please anybody but yourself. It's like having your

own place—a basement apartment in a forest, complete with all the forty-year-old soup you can eat.

I reach the trail, speed up to a jog, and that's when it hits me. The breeze travels from my armpits to my nose, and I realize that woods don't stink; *I* do. It isn't exactly body odor. But when you wear the same clothes three days running, you're going to get pretty ripe.

I check the time on my phone. Perfect. Marcus will have left for work by now. If I hurry, I can swing by home, grab a shower and fresh duds, and still make it to school by the late bell.

I let myself in, run upstairs, shower in world-record time, and throw on fresh joggers and a sweatshirt. I cram a couple of extra outfits into a backpack for future use—there's no shower at the fort, but I can always wash up at the sink. On the way down again, I'm caught completely off guard when the front door opens and Marcus steps inside. He's reaching for his windbreaker, which hangs on a peg in the hall, when he spots me.

"C.J.—"

I fly the rest of the way down the stairs and execute a 180 worthy of any of my death-defiers, sprinting for the back door.

What Marcus lacks in speed he makes up for in sheer size. One of his strides is worth two of mine. He catches up with me in the kitchen, grabs me by the shoulders, and spins me around.

I brace myself for what's coming next—a fist like a battering ram, a shove through the storm door. Marcus sometimes

does this thing where he picks you up under the arms and shakes you until your brain turns to Frappuccino.

Instead, he pulls me into a suffocating bear hug and goes on and on about how he and Mom were so worried, and thank God I've come to my senses, and blah, blah, blah.

When I get my strength back, I push him to arm's length and say, "I'm late for school."

"Right!" he exclaims. "Sure thing, buddy! I'll drive you!"

"I can walk."

"The car's right outside," he insists. "I just stopped home because I left my ID badge in my jacket—stupid me, huh?"

I don't answer, but *stupid* isn't the word I'd use. *Vicious. Dangerous. Out of control. Unstable.* Those would be more like it.

Maintaining a vise grip on me, he hustles me to the front door, but stops to pat on some pancake makeup to cover my cheek, which is still bruised, courtesy of him.

At the sight of the makeup compact on the hall table, I see red. "Did you hit my mother?"

"What?" He's dismayed. "Of course not! Why would you even ask?"

"Every time there's makeup by the door, it's because Mom has to cover some mark *you* put on her!"

"Never!" he swears, crossing where his heart would be if he had one. He pulls out his phone and offers it to me. "You can ask her!"

"She'll lie for you," I say bitterly. "She's done it a million

times." That's why it's never worth calling the cops on Marcus. No matter what he does, my mother would never press charges.

He drags me out to the car, but I refuse to get in. "I said I can walk."

"And I said I'll drive you."

I recognize the edge in his voice. Something's coming. To try to ward it off, I obey and get into the passenger seat. He slams the door so hard I'm amazed the windshield doesn't shatter. Only my backpack saves my shoulder.

By the time he walks around the car and gets into the driver's seat, he's sweet, even-tempered Marcus again. "Mom's going to be thrilled when I tell her you're back. She was so worried! We both were. Hey, let's order Fontana's for dinner tonight—I know that's your favorite."

As he goes on and on about a fun family reunion, all I can see is Mom's pancake makeup on the hall table. *If you hit my mother . . . If you hit my mother . . .*

I know that I've got to get out of this car before my head explodes.

We're half a block from the school now, and the traffic slows down as the drop-off line blocks the right lane. It's my chance. When Marcus taps the brake, I fling the door wide, clutch my backpack, and hurl myself out onto the road.

We're only going about fifteen miles an hour, but the impact feels like I've dropped off a skyscraper. By sheer instinct, I roll for the sidewalk. The next thing I know, skinny arms grab me and pull me over the curb to safety.

Ricky peers anxiously into my face. "C.J.?"

I look out into the road. Through the open door of Marcus's sedan, I see my stepfather's astonishment and rage. It's like he's trying to decide whether or not to drag me back in. But when he recognizes Ricky—and realizes everything he does to me here will be witnessed—he pulls the door shut, snakes past the traffic, and speeds away.

"What just happened?" Ricky asks in shock.

I pick myself up and dust myself off, ignoring a few newly acquired bumps and scrapes. "Just my latest death-defier. Like it?"

"You jumped out of a moving car!"

"Good one, right?"

"You're lucky to be alive!" he marvels. "Why would your dad let you do that?"

I freeze. "Marcus is *not* my dad. He's my mother's husband."

Now he's looking directly into my face. "And how come you're wearing makeup?"

"I'm not," I lie.

"You are so. It's all over your pogo-stick bruise."

"It's not makeup. It's disinfectant."

I always stood up for Ricky when Mitchell and the others complained about him. But now he's starting to get on my nerves.

The bell rings, and we break into a jog, me in the lead. I can feel Ricky's magnet-school eyes burning into the back of my head.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LUKE DONNELLY

I don't go to school much anymore. They've got nothing to offer me.

Trigonometry, for instance. Sine. Tangent. Cosecant. Garbage. What did that ever solve? When your mother and father decide that getting high is more important than being parents, the answer isn't in any math book.

Social studies was pretty good. I learned some life lessons there. We were studying the worst tyrants in history—Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong. Trust me, those dictators could take a back seat to my grandmother. Man, does she hate me! It's like she blames me for every bad thing Mom and Dad ever did. But since she can't hold me responsible for them ending up in rehab and worse, she nitpicks every single thing about me. My grades are terrible; why don't I get a haircut?; I dress like a juvenile delinquent; I'm rude and disrespectful; my grammar is lousy; I set an awful example for my kid brother, Evan.

Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful to Grandma and Grandpa for taking us in after Mom and Dad dropped out of the picture. And Grandpa's pretty nice, if you don't mind bad jokes

and garlic breath. For sure, you have to feel sorry for the guy. He's been married to Grandma for forty years. She doesn't hate him the way she hates me, but finding faults is kind of her superpower. Grandpa never puts the garbage can lids all the way on, and he chews too loud, and his nose whistles when he sleeps, which is usually in front of the TV.

Incidentally, the one person Grandma has absolutely nothing to say about is Evan. Not that Evan's perfect or anything like that, because he isn't.

I overheard her talking to Grandpa about him one time: "Poor little kid, his parents just walking away. My heart breaks for him."

All that stuff is true—but it's true about me too! How come her heart doesn't break for *me*?

Maybe she thinks that, since I'm four years older, I can take it like a man. Well, I couldn't at first. But I can now—thanks to Jaeger.

Jaeger's tough, and he's teaching me to be tough. I need that. The world is a rotten place, and a guy has to protect himself. If you don't, you get trampled.

Like Jaeger figured out how useless school is a long time ago. But he didn't just cut classes—he up and quit. And anybody who doesn't like it can shove it.

A lot of kids at school think Jaeger's a jerk. But they're just jealous because he has a great car and total freedom, and he lives his life the way he wants. And maybe he *is* kind of a jerk. What's so bad about that? You have to be strong to survive and come out on top. People are afraid of him. He gets *respect*.

Sometimes he scares even me a little, but I know that's only because I haven't learned to be tough enough yet. He's the perfect friend for a guy like me. I'm lucky to have him. And considering how lucky I've been up till now, I need all the luck I can get.

One weird thing about Jaeger: He tries really hard to get my grandma to like him. He gets super polite when she's around and always makes an effort to be helpful. This is a guy who gives zero hoots what anybody thinks about him. What makes it double weird is he's chosen the one person who never gives anybody a break for any reason. He could sprout wings and a halo, and hand her a million dollars cash, and he'd still be "that horrible Devlin boy."

"I'm telling you, man," I say to him. "You're wasting your time. You can't get to that old bag's heart, because she hasn't got one."

Jaeger shrugs. "My time to waste." He tips his head back and takes a swig from the syrup dispenser we swiped from Pancake Palace.

The two of us are lounging in the Mustang with the top down. I'm shivering a little in the night air, but Jaeger likes it cool. He says it keeps his senses alert.

We're parked in the alley behind the dollar store, because Jaeger noticed the back door is really old, and the lock might be easy to jimmy open. That's another thing about Jaeger—he's got eagle eyes. He's great at scoping out opportunities.

That's when a slight figure cuts across the alley and ducks through to the neighborhood that starts on the other side.

Jaeger sits forward. "Wasn't that your brother's goofball friend? The nutjob?"

I nod. "Mitchell Worthless. Where's he going at this time of night?"

Jaeger starts the car, and we head out of the alley onto the main road. There's Mitchell, walking with purpose past the main entrance to Canaan Estates.

Jaeger frowns. "That kid lives in Estates? I thought he was dirt poor."

"No way," I conclude. "What's he up to?"

We follow him, keeping well back. Jaeger drives an amazing car, but it's not quiet, and we don't want Mitchell to know we're on his tail. You'd have to be an idiot not to notice the Mustang. Luckily, Worthless is so focused on what he's doing that he's shut out everything else.

We watch as the kid approaches a big, well-landscaped home and hops the fence into the yard.

I'm blown away. "He's robbing houses? A little shrimp like him?"

"It would explain where your brother and his dopey friends are getting all that money," Jaeger replies.

I can't picture Evan, Grandma's little darling, as part of a burglary ring—especially after he froze at the cash register that day at Doyle's. But you never know. Since I've been hanging with Jaeger, I've done some things I wouldn't have expected of myself.

We leave the car down the block and approach the house on foot. There's a sign on the front lawn:

EDWARD H. BRECKINRIDGE, MD, PHD
DOCTOR OF PSYCHIATRY

"Who's Edward H. Breckinridge?" I whisper.

Jaeger shrugs.

The two of us walk to the fence, step on the bottom rail, and hoist ourselves up so we can peer over the top.

I've never known Jaeger to have much of a sense of humor, but he has to struggle to keep from laughing out loud. I squint in the darkness. Mitchell is standing in the middle of a small, neatly planted garden, peeing his way methodically all around the square bed.

I catch Jaeger's eye and mouth the words "What the—?" but he waves me off.

The funniest part is the pure concentration on Mitchell's face, like he's performing brain surgery or something. He finishes, zips up, and turns to leave.

Jaeger flashes me a high sign. We both jump down and stand, waiting. The kid comes over the fence, hits the ground right between us, and we grab him.

Worthless practically jumps out of his skin. I've never seen anybody so shocked.

Jaeger awards him a slow clap. "Bravo. What a performance. Academy Award stuff."

Mitchell looks haunted. "What did you see?"

"We saw it all," Jaeger confirms. *"Oui, oui, monsieur."*

"There's a Texaco on the corner," I add. "Why can't you use the bathroom there? What's so special about this guy's plants?"

"That's *my* business," the kid sputters, tight-lipped.

"True enough," Jaeger acknowledges. With a lightning motion, he snatches the phone out of Mitchell's back pocket and begins tapping apps at random.

"Hey, give that back!"

"Be happy to," Jaeger replies amiably. "As soon as you tell me where you and your nitwit friends are getting all that money."

"There is no money!" Mitchell insists.

"Don't give us that," I jump in. "Even my brother has cash he's got no business having."

"You want to know my theory?" Jaeger offers. "I think the money comes from whatever you idiots have going in the woods. And don't try to tell me it's that dumpy little rock table. I'm not stupid." He scrolls down with his index fingers. "Why is everybody texting about Peru? What's Peru?"

"It's a country in South America," Mitchell says defiantly.

Jaeger doesn't lose his cool very often. So when his pale complexion floods with red, it's a plenty scary sight. He takes hold of Mitchell's sweatshirt and twists, his clenched fist pressing against the kid's throat.

I have no great love for Mitchell Worthless. But he's just a kid—my brother's age. And he seems even younger, dopey as he is. He's so outclassed up against a guy like Jaeger that I can't help feeling sorry for him.

"Leave him alone," I blurt suddenly.

"Step off, man!" Jaeger barks at me, not relaxing his grip on the terrified Mitchell.

I can't let it go on. I lean right into Mitchell's face. "If you don't give us the information we want, we'll call the cops and tell them what you did to this guy's garden. That's a crime, you know."

He flinches like I slapped him. I inch closer and deliver the one threat that's going to hurt the most: "Lawyers are expensive. How many more jobs is your mother going to have to get to keep your sorry butt out of juvie?"

With that, Jaeger lets go. Mitchell collapses to the grass, gasping and teary-eyed. Jaeger tosses his phone down beside him. Just as the kid is about to reach for it, Jaeger stomps on the screen, delivering a jagged crack. "If that turns up fixed, it's proof you've got cash coming from somewhere. Now scram!"

Mitchell grabs the wreckage of his phone and runs off down the street.

"And don't take forever to tell us what we want to know!" I call after him.

We watch him race out of sight. Then Jaeger turns to me. "It could work, you know. That kid might be just dumb enough to believe that the cops don't have anything more important to do than to track down serial pee-ers."

That's almost a compliment—and compliments from Jaeger are few and far between. I feel warm all over.

He adds, "But don't *ever* go against me again."

That's the thing about Jaeger. Just when you think you're best friends, he'll make sure you feel exactly the way Mitchell must have felt.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JASON BRAX

There's only one thing my parents fight about more than who gets custody of me. It all started on their honeymoon in Arizona, when they bought this night-blooming cereus cactus plant. It grows this big white flower, but it only happens once a year, in the middle of the night. As a little kid, I remember being plucked out of bed at two a.m. to look at this dumb bloom, because it wasn't going to be there in the morning. And my parents would lecture me about how much older and taller I was going to be, and what grade I'd be in, the next time I saw it.

Anyway, the older I got, the less anybody cared about the cactus—until the divorce. All of a sudden, it's the greatest treasure we own. And since a cactus can't ride a bike between two houses three miles apart, it can't do joint custody. Both Mom and Dad told their lawyers there can be no agreement unless they get to keep the night-blooming cereus.

So I kidnapped it. And I hid it where Mom and Dad would never know to look for it—the fort. The guys really like it. I'll never understand why. When it isn't blooming—which is three hundred sixty-four and a half days a year—it's just three ugly spiny stalks sticking out of a flowerpot.

The problem is they're trying to be helpful by watering it.

You shouldn't overwater a cactus, because it's used to the desert. And now it's dying.

It's the perfect symbol for when your parents get divorced. No matter how much you try to make things better, they only get worse. My mother thinks my father broke into the house and stole it. Dad thinks Mom is hiding it from him.

If it dies, I'll never be able to make it right.

The only person not guilty of overwatering is Mitchell. He's stopped coming to the fort completely. He says he's sick—and he's been out of school all week—but I don't think I believe it. On the phone, he doesn't sound sick; he sounds like he doesn't want to talk to me.

Ricky is skeptical. "It's not impossible," he reasons. "People get sick all the time. And his mom wouldn't let him stay home from school if she thought he was faking."

"Yeah, but when I asked him what he's sick with, he kind of panicked," I counter. "He started babbling."

"If he's staying away from the fort, it must be pretty serious," Evan decides. "He loves the fort as much as any of us."

The thing is, I have something important to discuss with Mitchell. I know he has his eyes on this WORLD'S GREATEST MOM mug for his mother. But the guys have voted to stop selling cutlery for a while, because Luke and Jaeger have been nosing around, trying to figure out where our money is coming from. Just Mitchell's luck—we were unloading tons of the stuff to buy nachos and chicken wings to stuff our faces on movie nights at the fort. And when he needs a lousy fifteen bucks to do something nice for his mom, he can't get it.

This is the guy who had to live without a phone for four months because he couldn't afford to have the screen fixed. And his mom works twenty-five hours a day just to keep them afloat. They *deserve* this! Mitchell has the right to see his mother smile. I'm determined to make it happen, because that's what friends do.

I don't ask permission, because Ricky'll probably say no. The next time I'm alone in the fort, I go straight to the cutlery drawer and nab a little shrimp fork—the smallest piece in there. I give it a quick wipe with the silver polish to clean off the black stuff. Then I jam it into my back pocket.

I can't go straight to the pawnshop, because I promised to help Janelle move her bookshelf to make room for the new amp she bought for her electric guitar. That takes a long time, because we have to pull out all the books and then put them back in exactly the right order.

I'm pretty exhausted when it's all over, so I throw myself into her beanbag chair.

And scream. *"Owwww!"*

A searing pain rips into my hind end.

"Jason—what's wrong?"

"Something bit me!" I exclaim.

"Beans don't bite!" she retorts.

I reach back to investigate and come up with the silver shrimp fork, its three sharp tines red with my blood.

"Why do you have a fork in your pocket?" she demands.

"Because"—my mind races and comes up empty—"if you put them in your shoes, they get bent." No, I don't think that

makes any sense. But I have absolutely no idea how to answer her question.

She orders me into the bathroom. "The Band-Aids are in the top drawer." I don't know what the most embarrassing thing in the universe is, but puncturing your rear end in front of your girlfriend has got to be right up there.

When I come back, she's sitting on the edge of her bed, examining the little fork closely. "Jason, where did you get this?"

"I—I found it." It's not technically a lie. I did find it. I found it in the kitchen of the fort with a boatload of other super-valuable pieces of cutlery.

"I think this might be part of a police investigation my dad told me about," she explains. "One of the pawnshops downtown has been buying up a lot of really expensive European silver. They think it might have belonged to the Delamere family."

I'm panicking. I'm even scared enough to forget how much my butt puncture still hurts. The cops know about our silverware?

She holds the fork out to me. "You see all this engraving? That's a *D* in the middle—the Delamere family symbol. My dad says it's all part of a set that was lost when Bennett Delamere died back in the eighties. They don't know why it's turning up now, but they believe it might have been stolen."

It gets worse and worse. Stolen! Do they think *we* stole it? *Did* we? It's Bennett Delamere's bomb shelter, not ours. "Wow, that's really—uh—interesting—"

"I can't wait to show this to my dad," she goes on. "It could be an important clue. Where did you find it? Wait—don't tell me. We should talk to Dad together."

All this time, my mind has been racing, figuring the angles, grasping at straws, searching for a way out of this conversation without blabbing about the fort. Finally, I croak, "I can't talk to your dad."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you that either."

She seems one hundred percent bewildered. "Jason, what's going on?"

It's almost painful to gasp out the words. "It's a secret."

"There are no secrets in a relationship," she lectures, waving the fork under my nose. "You know that."

"Well, maybe just one . . ."

"None," she corrects me firmly. "This isn't going to work unless we totally trust each other. That can't happen if we keep secrets."

It's like I'm tightrope walking in the middle of a hurricane. "Yeah, but what if it's not just *your* secret? What if it also belongs to—you know—a bunch of other guys?"

She jumps all over this. "You mean Evan, Mitchell, and C.J.?"

"Not just," I offer defensively. "There's also that new kid, Ricky."

"And how do they fit in?"

I feel like I'm about to throw up. I can never hide anything from Janelle. She's like my personal CIA. Secrets? She's

got nothing to worry about there. I could no more keep a secret from Janelle than I could fly.

She's got me backed into a corner where all I can do is confess. And the really awful part is I'm about to break my promise to my friends and probably lose them. And maybe even lose the fort—which is the greatest thing a bunch of guys like us could ever have.

On the other hand, this isn't just about my relationship with Janelle. The *police* are involved in it. We could be breaking the law without even knowing it. We could be the most innocent criminals in the history of crime!

Janelle leans closer, her eyes burning into me. "Jason?"

And I cave. "It was the day after the hurricane. I was walking through the woods with the guys . . ."

C.J. SCIUTTO

I've started talking to Jason's cactus.

I haven't told the other guys—they'll think I'm losing my marbles. I wish I could be sure I'm not. When you spend a lot of hours by yourself in a windowless, enclosed space, strange things happen.

So far, the cactus hasn't answered me back. That has to be a good sign.

When we first found the fort, I thought it was the greatest thing ever. More than a clubhouse—a place with privacy, furniture, entertainment, food. And as we discovered what it had to offer, and tricked it out—like with my PlayStation and the cactus—I loved it the most of any of us. The fort is pure escapism. And I had more to escape than the other guys.

Well, now that I'm pretty much living here, it's not the same. The fort is still awesome, and we have a great time when we're here together. But when I'm alone—when it's just me and the cactus—I feel like the metal walls are closing in.

Don't get me wrong; I love the place. What I hate is the reason why I'm sleeping here every night. I've had enough of Marcus. I refuse to be his punching bag ever again.

I also hate that me being here means that Mom is all alone

with that big jerk. Not that I'm strong enough to protect her from a six-foot-three maniac. But at least when Marcus is focused on me, he usually leaves her alone.

Who knows—maybe when it's just the two of them, Marcus is nice to her. I doubt it, though. I picture the makeup compact on the hall table.

Another thing I hate: Lying to the guys about why I'm always here when they arrive, and why I'm always the "last to leave." One of the great things about having best friends is that you can tell each other anything.

Not anymore.

I've gotten the hang of it. At first, I used to sleep with a pillow over my face, because the only way to turn off the lights was to cut power for the whole fort, which turned off the air-circulating pump. But now I've figured out that I just have to loosen the three light bulbs before bedding down.

There's stuff to do when I'm here alone. Homework. Video games. I rewatch my favorite old movies and water Jason's cactus. I try to do that a couple of times a day, because one of the stalks is starting to look a little brown around the roots.

For the first time in my life, I actually enjoy going to school. It's normal—and the rest of my life straight-up isn't. I even love cafeteria food now. Anything that doesn't come from forty-year-old cans tastes like gourmet stuff to me. The guys see me in the lunchroom, chowing down and smacking my lips, and look at me like I'm from the moon.

My favorite times are when the other guys are at the fort, even Ricky. After school, we usually walk over together. But on

weekends, it's just me until the others trickle in. Those hours drag on *forever*.

There are days when I can't even enjoy the good times, because I know they'll be ending pretty soon. By the time we hit late afternoon, I'm already brainstorming excuses for why I won't be leaving with everybody else—some movie I have to finish, or some *Call of Duty* campaign I still need to level up in. Whatever might explain why I'm not heading home without revealing the truth—I *am* home.

It's even affecting my gaming, which I've always been proud of.

"What's with you, C.J.?" Evan demands after I've been sniped for the third time in the same mission.

"Your head's not in it today," Ricky adds, a little more diplomatically.

The trapdoor opens and Jason starts down the ladder to the fort, back from his plans with Janelle.

"Ro-me-o!!!" I moose-call over.

He jumps to the floor, an expression on his face that's hard to read. A moment later, a petite figure appears on the metal rungs.

Janelle.

We leap to our feet like startled animals. The number one rule of the fort is total secrecy. The fact that Jason brought his girlfriend here is not just a violation of the prime directive; it's a betrayal of the friend code!

Jason puts up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Don't kill me until you've heard the whole story."

Janelle is rubbernecking all around, taking in her surroundings. "Amazing!" she tells Jason. "I thought you were exaggerating, but this is incredible!"

"Bennett Delamere built it as a bomb shelter," Ricky supplies. "Back in the Cold War, he honestly thought he had to live underground to survive a nuclear attack."

"The thing is," Evan puts in, glaring at Jason, "it's supposed to stay really private."

"It's not my fault!" Jason practically moans. "I had to tell her! It's all because I stabbed myself in the butt cheek—"

We listen in dismay as Jason spits out what happened. Our dopey friend took a shrimp fork and somehow managed to sit on it. And Janelle recognized the cutlery pattern from an investigation her dad told her about. In a way, it's pretty funny. But it also shows how easily things can fall apart when you're trying to keep too many secrets.

"Here's the problem," Evan explains to Janelle. "The more people who know about the fort, the greater the danger that somebody is going to let slip in front of an adult—"

"Like a police officer," I put in meaningfully.

"Once the authorities know about this place," Ricky adds, "we're pretty sure we're going to lose it. They'll either say we're trespassing or declare it a safety hazard or a historic site and kick us out."

She's taken aback. "Is that what this is about? You think I'll tell my father? Well, I won't. You let me in on your secret and I respect that."

Jason slumps against the metal wall, weak with relief.

She wheels on him. "But what about the *dis*respect of not telling me in the first place?" she demands. "All the broken dates, the lame excuses, the lies!"

Jason points at us. "It's their fault! They made me promise to keep it guys only!"

She rakes the three of us with a baleful look. "That's sexist. It's also really low to drive a wedge between a boyfriend and girlfriend." Her accusing eyes land on Ricky. "I'd expect it from these immature yahoos, but you should know better."

Ricky flushes red.

Jason claps his hands. "Well, I guess this all worked out." He sounds way too hopeful, considering how ticked off at him everybody is.

"It's a fantastic place," Janelle announces. "I can't wait to spend more time here." She sniffs the air. "I think you guys need to start with some cleaning, though. It smells like a locker room."

I hope she means the cactus, which has picked up a kind of compost-y aroma. But I have a sneaking suspicion that she's talking about the aroma of my three-day-old socks.

I'll bet none of the guys would have noticed for another two weeks. But throw one girl into the mix and everything's different. If Janelle is part of the fort now, I'm going to have to do a better job hiding the fact that my home away from home is my home, period.

"And stop watering that cactus," she adds. "You're killing it."

Now she can't even leave my roommate alone.

Evan, Jason, and Ricky don't look very happy, but for me, things are a lot worse.

I have a sinking feeling this isn't going to end well.

I hope Ricky makes it into that new magnet school soon. He's been irritating me lately.

Ever since he saw me jump out of Marcus's car that day, he's been watching me. It's especially annoying in science class, where he sits at the next desk, staring at me like he's afraid I'm about to hurl myself through the second-story window and plunge to the playground below.

I guess I did too good a job selling myself as a daredevil to the other guys.

"Take a picture," I whisper at him. "It lasts longer."

Just then, the PA system bursts to life. *"Would C.J. Sciutto please report to the main office."*

As I stand up, Ricky's curious eyes are on me again.

"Please hurry back, C.J.," Mrs. Delacroix tells me. "We're having a quiz later."

As I make my way through the halls and down the stairs, I'm thinking, *Have I done anything lately?* I mean, obviously, I've done a lot. But have I done anything the school would know about?

I walk into the office, and the answer is right there in front of me. My mother sits at the table in conference room one. A quick scan confirms that she's alone—no teacher or

administrator with her. This isn't a school matter. Mom came here because she knows it's the only way to pin me down.

I take a deep breath and walk into the room. I'll have to face her at some point. It might as well be sooner rather than later.

"Hi, Mom."

She throws her arms around me and hugs me for a very long time. I wasn't expecting that, and it shakes me. I was planning to play this tough, but the minute she starts to cry, I just choke. I haven't seen her in days. I'm not even sure how many, but it's definitely the longest we've ever been separated.

She breathes rather than says, "C.J., please come home."

"I can't."

"Of course you can!" she exclaims. "You have to! You're only thirteen years old!"

"I can look after myself," I tell her stubbornly. "I'm doing just fine."

She reaches out and runs a hand through my hair. "You don't look fine. When's the last time you had a shower?"

"I'm not going home. Not while *he's* there."

She pauses, almost like a reset. She always knew this conversation was going to cover the topic of my stepfather, but she was never sure how soon. When she speaks again, her voice is subdued.

"Marcus *loves* you."

"Yeah?" I shoot back bitterly. "Well, I don't want to see what it would be like if he hated me!"

"You know it's true," she insists.

The strange part is she might even be right, part of the time. When Marcus isn't blowing his stack, he's sweet as pie, showering us with presents and dreaming up family activities that'll bring us closer. The problem is, you never know which Marcus you're going to get, or how fast the nice version will morph into the dangerous one.

"It doesn't matter if he means well," I try to reason. "It's what he *does* that's the problem."

"He's my husband!"

"I don't care! He's so unhinged that he can go from Mr. Nice Guy to putting me in the hospital in the blink of an eye. I'm not going to live like that and you shouldn't either!"

It's funny—for all the years that Marcus has been a part of our world, this is the first time we've had this discussion. Marcus has always been Marcus—that started pretty early on. But we were never honest about it before. We only talked about the *injuries*—this scrape needs antiseptic, those ribs need X-rays, that gash needs stitches. We discussed those things like they were random accidents, pure bad luck—totally ignoring the fact that there was an actual person deliberately doing them to us.

To me, mostly.

Mom leans over and places both hands on my forearm. "I know we've had our moments. But things have been better lately. *Marcus* has been better. He understands why you've been staying away. He feels terrible about it. I promise we're going to get past this!"

I stare at her in disbelief. *Had our moments?* Is that how she describes our family? Marcus—*better?* In what universe?

It comes to me in a sudden rush of understanding: This is how she copes with the nightmare our house has become. This is how she gets through the hours of the day, the days of the week, the weeks of the month, the months of the year. By telling herself that it's getting better, and "we're going to get past this."

"I'll make a deal with you," I say. "I'll come home if Marcus isn't going to be there anymore."

Instead of seeing that this is the only way, she gets mad. "Don't make deals with me, mister. You're still a child and Marcus and I are your parents. If you won't come willingly, we can have the police drag you home."

"You won't," I challenge her, "because you don't want the cops to get too close a look at our so-called happy family. Cuts and bruises are pretty incriminating evidence, and I'm not going to lie about where they came from anymore."

"C.J.—"

"We're done here." I spring up and turn away from her. I know if I see the look on her face, I'll never have the courage to walk out of that room.

All the way through the halls and up the stairs, I have to fight the urge to spin around and run back to conference room one. It would be so easy to tell my mother I'm coming home. See her smile again. Take a real shower. Eat food that doesn't come from the last century.

Everything would be perfect . . . for a few days. Then it would all start again. Marcus—

It's not worth it. Nothing is.

When I slip into my seat in science class, sure enough, Ricky is staring at me harder than ever.

That's when I touch my face and notice two moist trickles, one down each cheek.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MITCHELL WORTH

The guys don't believe that I'm really sick, and even my mom is starting to look a little suspicious.

"It's been over a week, Mitchell," she tells me. "Your nose isn't running. Your eyes are clear. And your fever is gone—*if* you ever had one in the first place."

"It's dragging on," I insist. "Remember when I broke the bathroom mirror last summer? This is part of my bad luck. Get used to it—we've got six more years to go."

"That was *my* bad luck, not yours," she retorts. "I'm the one who had to buy a new mirror."

If there's one good thing about Mom working so hard, it's that she's usually too tired to finish these arguments with me. Sooner or later, she always has to run off to one of her three jobs, so I win.

The guys stop by on Wednesday after school. I'm so glad to see them that I don't even mind that they bring Ricky.

"I can't let you in," I call through a crack in the window. "You'll catch my cold."

"You said before it was the flu," Evan challenges me.

"Right," I agree. "It's kind of a coldy, fluish thing."

"Cut it out," C.J. snaps at me. "You're not sick. What's

up with you? Is it school? Dude, nobody cares how you do in school."

They stick around for a while, bugging me to come with them to the fort. Don't they know I'd go with them if I could? It's my favorite place!

I'm dying to tell them the truth—that what happened the night Luke and Jaeger caught me in Dr. Breckinridge's herb garden changed everything. *That's* the bad luck from the broken mirror—or maybe from the time I got too close to the Abernathys' black cat, and it might have crossed my path.

How can I tell the guys that Luke and Jaeger are blackmailing me? I don't want to drag my friends into this mess! But if I don't spill the beans about the fort and where to find it, Luke and Jaeger are going to turn me in to the cops for public peeing.

As it is, Mom barely brings in enough money to support us. How are we ever going to afford lawyers? Whoever said crime doesn't pay must be really dumb. I commit one tiny offense and I'm going to be paying for the rest of my life.

Thanks to a little bit of pee, I have to hide from my own friends. And I can't go to the fort anymore. Now that Luke and Jaeger are onto me, they could be following me at any minute. Worse, I have no way of knowing when they tell the police about me. So not only could I be leading two dangerous jerks to the fort; I could be leading the police there too.

No way. I made a promise to the guys and signed my name in a circle. I may be a criminal, but I'm no snitch.

Tough as it is, talking with the guys this afternoon really makes me want to see the fort one more time. I can't go there during the day, when it would be decently fun—it's just too dangerous now that I'm being watched.

But once I get a thought in my head, it's pretty hard to let go of it. That's how I come up with the idea of visiting the place in the middle of the night. Not to do anything there (and for sure not to rewatch *Jaws*). Just to *be* there—to feel my sneakers on the metal rungs of the ladder, to hear the hum of the air-circulating pump, maybe even taste some baked beans from the 1970s.

Luckily, when my mom sleeps, not even the loudest bullhorn in the world could wake her. She gets home from her shift around twelve thirty, and by one, she's out like a light. I wait an extra hour just to make sure—and also because one a.m. is sort of like thirteen o'clock in the afternoon. I don't know if that counts in the real world, but better to avoid it, just to be on the safe side.

Two o'clock in the morning is a deserted time in Canaan, so I have the town to myself. Even so, I keep to the shadows as I slink toward the woods. Once under cover of the trees, I use the flashlight in my phone so I can see in the dark. That's thanks to Jaeger—he busted the screen, but everything still works.

Oops—the minute I think of him, suddenly I see him lurking behind every tree trunk and bush. Luke too, although Jaeger's the one who scares me the most. There's no reason to think I'm

being followed, but I half expect to see that lousy Mustang, parked in a clearing somewhere, waiting to run me over.

By the time I make it to the lookout tree, I'm losing it. If I go up there and look down, I'm convinced I'll see not just Jaeger, but also Jack the Ripper, Voldemort, and the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

It's not real, I tell myself. And anyway, if I climb a tree and shine my phone down, I'll be turning myself into a human lighthouse for anybody who happens to be awake in town.

There's the trapdoor. I clear the covering branches and open it up. I stuff my phone in my pocket so I can close myself in when I climb down the ladder. Once I'm on the welcome mat at the bottom, I don't even need extra light. By sheer habit, my hand moves to the toggle switch that turns on the power.

Wait a minute. The switch is already down—the on position. The lights should be on already. Why is the fort dark?

I flip the switch up and then pull it down again. It clunks into place. But still no lights. What's going on? I can definitely hear the circulation pump working and feel the air moving.

What's wrong with the fort?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

C.J. SCIUTTO

I was never a light sleeper before Mom married Marcus. Living with a human time bomb teaches you to keep one eye open, even in the middle of the night. There's no predicting when my stepfather's short fuse is going to run out and I'll get dragged out of bed at three in the morning. For Marcus, the cause of the freak-out and the person he freaks out *on* don't have to be connected. I could be dreaming about unicorns dancing on feather clouds and get a black eye because a West Coast baseball game he wanted to watch got rained out.

So when I hear the trapdoor open, I'm off the couch in a heartbeat, standing at the ready, poised like a panther in the darkness. The gonging of feet descending the ladder strikes terror in my heart. Someone has found the fort, found *me*. My first thought is of Luke and Jaeger, since they've been stalking us for a while, getting ever closer. That would be bad enough, but as my fevered brain sifts dizzily through the possibilities, I realize that anybody else would be even worse. I could be trapped underground with some random stranger!

My first impulse is to shine my phone light on the intruder, so I'll know what I'm up against. But that would pinpoint me. Right now, the element of surprise might be the only advantage I have.

I hear the clunk of the main power switch. The air pump goes off and comes on again, but there's no light, since I've loosened the three bulbs. That means whoever it is has information about how the fort works. I'm still half asleep, though. And with my heart pounding, my mind fuzzy, and in complete darkness, I can't reason out what that might mean. All I know is I have to defend myself. And the best defense is a good offense.

Careful to make zero sound, I shuffle forward on bare feet. The darkness is near total, but I sense a faint glow coming from the entrance hatchway. I can barely spot a figure standing there with the light source—a phone?—bleeding out of a front pocket. I don't even think. I just act.

I hurl myself at the intruder's hips in a flying tackle. The guy goes down with a major "oof!" and as he does, his knee comes up and conks me in the jaw.

I see stars . . . and I also see something else, briefly lit by the light of a flashlight app escaping a jeans pocket: the horror-stricken face of Mitchell Worth scrambling up the ladder and out the trapdoor like he's being chased by a hungry T. rex.

I open my mouth to call his name, but at the last second, I stop myself. What explanation could I possibly have for being at the fort in the middle of the night except the plain truth: I'm sleeping here?

I don't want anybody to know that.

Why would Mitchell come to the fort in the middle of the night? It's a good question, but I realize there doesn't have to be an answer. We're talking about Mitchell. I'm sure he has a

reason, but we're never going to know it—just like we're never going to know why he decided to fake sick and drop off the face of the earth.

I screw the bulbs the rest of the way in and make sure the trapdoor is properly closed and covered. I'm not too concerned that Mitchell's coming back—he's probably still running.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, my phone pings. It's the group chat, with a bulletin from Mitchell: *Red Alert—somebody found Peru!!!!!!!*

Classic Mitchell: If it's worth one exclamation point, it's worth seven.

I hold my breath, waiting for replies from the guys. Five minutes go by. Then ten. Happily, everybody else slept through this crisis. And if they rush over here first thing in the morning, I can just say I'm here investigating the alarm, same as them.

Going back to sleep isn't an option. I'm too keyed up. So I rewatch *Tentacles* in Mitchell's honor—it's the movie that freaked him out even more than *Jaws*. I'm the only one of my friends who can watch scary movies alone. Once you've experienced Marcus in real life, a giant octopus from some 1970s special effects department seems pretty so-what-else-is-new.

A little after seven a.m., when the guys wake up for school and check their phones, the group chat comes to life: *What's going on? . . . Who found Peru? . . . Was it L and J?*

I text: *At Peru rn . . . all well . . . not sure what Mitchell meant.*

Mitchell fires back: *You weren't there last night! There was a guy! He tried to kill me!*

The messages kind of slow down at that point, and it isn't hard to figure out why. We all love Mitchell, but we understand how weird he can be. And these days, he's pretty much near his weirdness peak.

So I add: *We can talk at school.*

Mitchell: *No fair! Still sick!*

We meet in the playground, where I realize the guys are more rattled than I expected over Mitchell's claims of an intruder at the fort.

"He may be an oddball, but he doesn't make things up," Jason reasons, struggling to control his loud voice. "He says this guy *attacked* him!"

I shrug. "He was in the woods in the middle of the night, probably scared out of his wits. Maybe he tripped over a root and thought somebody grabbed his leg."

Ricky is unconvinced. "He said he was *in* the fort, not outside of it. He knows the difference between inside and outside."

"All I can tell you is I dropped by this morning, and everything was fine," I tell them. "No strangers. No attackers. Nobody grabbed my leg."

Evan frowns. "We're talking about mysterious strangers. But let's get it out in the open that who we really mean is my brother and his sleazy friend Jaeger. If anybody found the fort, it was those two."

"Nobody found the fort," I insist. "I was there this morning. Nothing's changed."

"Maybe that's what they want us to believe," Jason argues darkly. "Maybe they're setting a trap."

"Luke and Jaeger may be older and stronger and meaner, but they're not mind readers," I challenge him. "They can't get to the fort unless one of us tells them about it. I didn't. Did you guys?"

Ricky looks thoughtful. "There's only one person who knows about the fort who didn't before—Janelle."

Jason's eyes bulge. "Are you accusing my girlfriend of selling us out? *You're* the guy who showed up out of nowhere! *You're* the guy who isn't really anybody's friend! Maybe it was *you*!"

"It wasn't Ricky or Janelle," I jump in. "It wasn't anybody. We'll go after school. You'll see."

It's a pretty tense day, with all of us sharing classes and passing each other in the halls. To make matters worse, Mitchell is blowing up our phones with warnings that *Peru* has been *compromised*, *infiltrated*, *permeated*, *penetrated*, and *extirpated*. I can picture him sitting at home with a thesaurus, searching for a word that will get through to us about how much trouble we're in.

I feel sort of bad that I could put an end to all this just by telling the truth that *I* was the mysterious intruder who *extirpated* the fort—whatever that means. But that's not something I'm willing to admit, even to my best friends. It's not just my secret. It belongs to my mother as much as me. Besides, they'd never believe it. The guys are completely convinced that Marcus is stepfather of the year. And if they knew the truth . . . what could they do about it?

Since I'm the only one who knows there was no intruder, I'm the only one who isn't surprised when we go after school and find the fort totally untouched.

I don't get to say *I told you so*, though, because Janelle comes with us. And while we pronounce the place one hundred percent okay, she has another description for it:

"This whole place smells like week-old T-shirts!"

I've got to hand it to Janelle. She's pretty sharp—although I can vouch for the fact that some of the T-shirts have been lying around even longer than that.

I was wondering why Jason has been carrying a giant sack over his shoulder. He dumps it on the floor, and out tumbles a mop, a bucket, cleaners, sponges, a broom, and a collection of those air freshener things that you hang in a closet or car.

"Aw, come on," Evan groans. "The whole point of having a fort is getting out of the stuff you're forced to do at home."

Then Jason launches into a rehearsed speech about how "just because we have our own place doesn't mean we shouldn't treat it with respect."

It sounds so un-Jason that I have to laugh. That sets off Evan, and pretty soon Ricky is cackling into his sleeve. The best part is Jason starts cracking up too, even though he forces himself to push through to the end—this from the kid who flunked public speaking in sixth grade, because the only part he was good at was volume. By that time, the four of us are holding on to each other for support, and even Janelle can't keep herself from giggling a little.

"Okay, I get it," Ricky admits. "We're cave people. Maybe this place could smell better."

I'm as anti-chore as the next guy, but it occurs to me that this isn't such a terrible idea. A good cleanup might hide the evidence that I've been living here.

"I'm in," I announce, trying to sound as reluctant as possible. I grab a mop and a spray bottle of disinfectant and go to work on the floor.

Jason shoots me a grateful look and starts wiping down the counter with a moist towelette. Before you know it, we're all spread out around the fort, sweeping and scrubbing.

Janelle is wiping forty-year-old dust off our supply of food cans. "Hey, you guys are good at this. Keep it up and you'll lose your status as slobs."

For some reason, that makes everybody smile and work harder. Inside half an hour, the place is spotless and we're all high-fiving in a celebratory mood.

"I'll bet Bennett Delamere himself never knew this place could look so good," Evan comments.

I think back to the video we found on day one—Delamere talking to the invasion force he believed had already killed him. He definitely didn't mention anything about cleanliness in there. Then again, he was a multimillionaire, who probably never had to clean anything in his life.

But I'm actually kind of grateful to Janelle for this cleaning idea. I'm the one who sleeps here. Plus it's taken everybody's mind off Mitchell's story about the mysterious intruder.

And she's right—there *was* kind of a funk to the fort,

although none of us can agree on exactly what it smelled *like*. Evan said the scent of wet newspaper in the recycling bin after a rainy night. Jason called it Ogre's Toejam. Janelle gave it an actual name: *Eau de armpit*.

I'm the only one who knows what it really is: unwashed laundry stored underground—with a hint of overwatered cactus plant.

Anyway, it's gone now.

"Not *totally* gone," Ricky tells me, wrinkling his nose. "I can still notice it a little. Dude—I think it's on your clothes."

I try to make a joke out of it. "Yeah, I guess we've all spent a little too much time down here."

Ricky looks thoughtful. "That's weird. I smell it on you, but not on the rest of us."

Uh-oh. I guess his nose went to magnet school too—not just his brain.

Jason tries to dust his cactus. The brownish stalks wilt a little more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RICKY MOLINA

I might never have figured it out if some guy named Chad didn't mess up the paint for my room.

We fixed the busted window right after Hurricane Leo, but we don't get around to repainting until that weekend. And wouldn't you know it, Home Depot read our paint sample wrong. We were supposed to get Blizzard Blue, but they gave us Buzzard Blue instead, which is a totally different color.

Pretty soon, we're back at Home Depot, explaining the mix-up to Chad, the paint guy. He promises to swap out our order, but first he has to get his supervisor to sign off on it. He grabs the cans of Buzzard Blue and disappears through a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

The yelling starts almost immediately. A foghorn voice begins shouting at poor Chad, calling him stupid, and worthless, and a lot of other words that would get me in trouble if I got caught saying them out loud.

Maybe the shouter thinks no one can hear him because the door is closed, but he's echoing all over Home Depot, even though the ceiling must be forty feet high. Everywhere, people stop shopping to stand and listen. It's not that they're

eavesdropping; there's just no escape from it. The onslaught can't be ignored.

It doesn't end; it gets worse. The EMPLOYEES ONLY door opens and Chad backs out, his shoulders slumped, his face bright red. A second later, the supervisor appears, all six-foot-three of him, loud mouth still bellowing.

I could train a baboon to do this job, but not you! You cost the company money! It's coming out of your next paycheck! And on and on.

At this point, my parents are staring in horror, and I'm ready to run over there and tell that bully that I'm fine with a Buzzard Blue room just so long as he stops yelling at that poor clerk.

I actually take a couple of steps forward. And freeze.

The six-foot-three supervisor—the one destroying a young employee over two cans of paint—I *recognize* the guy.

It's C.J.'s stepdad, Marcus.

Not the joke-cracking, generous, fatherly Marcus all the guys talk about. I picture C.J. dropping out of a moving car and rolling across the pavement. It didn't make sense to me then; it makes sense to me now. *This* is the kind of person you jump out of a car to get away from.

For the others, it's almost a given that C.J. lucked out in the stepfather sweepstakes, because he has all the best stuff, and because Marcus is a fun guy. But it comes to me then that there's one of us who never joins in the conversation when the topic is the awesomeness of Marcus.

C.J. himself.

And once my brain has made it that far, everything else clunks into place. C.J. is always at the fort when the rest of the guys arrive, and he always finds an excuse to stay later when we leave. He's the only one of us whose clothes smell like the place. Mitchell wasn't lying when he claimed someone was in the fort when he went there that night. He just never realized that the "intruder" was C.J.—

C.J. is living at the fort.

And why? It's a question I never could have answered before the trip to Home Depot. But seeing Marcus tear apart a poor clerk over *paint* changes everything. He hides it well around C.J.'s friends, but the guy has a temper. A really bad temper.

The whirlwind in my head continues, a rapid-fire slideshow of C.J.'s injuries: cuts, bruises, scrapes, black eyes, bandaged ribs. C.J. the daredevil; only—*what if C.J. isn't a daredevil at all?* What if his injuries don't come from "death-defiers"—they come from Marcus? What if the "accidents"—the stunts gone wrong—are one hundred percent on purpose, to cover up the wounds and marks that are too obvious?

If that's true, it's no wonder C.J. never seems to appreciate the new phones and the tech and the great presents he gets from his stepdad. If that's true, Marcus's "generosity" comes at a very steep price.

I could be wrong. I know I could be wrong.

But what if I'm right?

Eventually, Marcus goes back to his office, and we're able to get our paint swapped. The storm is over, but Chad still looks

destroyed. You don't recover so fast from an attack like that. And at least Chad is an adult. C.J. is in middle school, and he has to deal with Marcus every day. It isn't hard to understand why he'd give up the comforts of home and all those great presents and go to live in a hole in the ground.

If I'm right, I've got to help him. But how?

My first impulse is to tell the whole story to my parents. But—again—what if I'm wrong? Besides, this isn't my story to tell. It's C.J.'s personal family business, and it's pretty obvious that he's trying to keep it private. My parents' solution could be to call the police on a guy who might turn out to be innocent. In any case, it would affect C.J. and his mom in ways it's hard to predict. It could change their whole lives, and it's not up to me to decide that for them.

I ache for C.J. My family is a source of total support for me. For him—if my suspicions are correct—it's just the opposite. On top of everything else he might be going through, he must feel completely alone.

That's when I realize that C.J. has a backup family—his friends. He's part of a group so tight that I'm still on the outside even after weeks of trying to fit in. They'll support him. I'm positive.

I just have to see if they agree that he needs their help.

I'd recognize Mitchell's mother anywhere. She and her son have the same face, although she's taller, with long blond hair.

I'm a little surprised she isn't lying flat on the floor, passed out cold with exhaustion—that's how Mitchell describes how overworked she is.

"Ricky . . . Ricky . . ." she repeats. "Funny—Mitchell's never mentioned you."

Typical Mitchell. He wishes I didn't exist, so he's pretending I don't.

"I'm new in town," I explain. "I went to a magnet school before here."

That rings a bell. "The magnet boy. Now I know who you are." She turns around and calls, "Mitch—your friend Ricky is here!"

"Never heard of him!"

His mom smiles. "Go on back. He'll be happy to see you."

Yeah, right. Ecstatic.

I have no trouble finding Mitchell's door. It's the one that slams shut the minute I turn the corner. I knock.

"I'm sick," he calls, and punctuates it with a fake cough.

I walk in. I don't know what I expected Mitchell's room to look like. Fun-house mirrors, maybe. But it's just a normal room, smallish and in need of a paint job. I bet I could get him a deal on two gallons of Buzzard Blue, only slightly used.

Mitchell lies on the bed, staring at a poster of a giant four-leaf clover. The only other decoration is a newspaper photo of a middle-aged man held to the wall with a dart right through the center of the forehead.

"Who's that?" I ask.

"Dr. Breckinridge," he replies in a surly tone. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Listen, man," I begin, "I know you don't want me here, but I have to talk to you about C.J. I think he's in trouble."

He swings his legs over the side of the bed and sits up to face me. "If this is some kind of joke—"

"It's no joke. Remember the time you went to the fort in the middle of the night, and some guy jumped you?"

As usual, he's touchier than a bear with a sore nose. "Thanks so much for talking about that night, which really did happen, even though everybody says I made it up!"

"I believe you," I tell him.

That catches him off guard. The one thing he isn't prepared for is me not being the enemy.

"I know you were telling the truth," I go on. "And that guy who attacked you? That was C.J."

"Why would C.J. attack me?"

"Because he didn't know it was you," I reply readily. "He was probably fast asleep. I think he's been living at the fort."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life!" Mitchell explodes. "Why would he do that? He has the best house of any of us!"

"The house is fine," I agree. "The problem is who's living there."

I describe what I saw at Home Depot and how it might explain C.J.'s many accidents and injuries a whole lot better than his so-called career as a daredevil. I go through all the other clues I've seen. None of them are so important by themselves, but together, they paint a convincing picture: C.J.'s long hours at the fort, his wrinkled clothes and permanent bedhead,

his desperation dive out the door of Marcus's car. I don't mention the tears I saw on C.J.'s face the day he was called to the office at school. That kind of suffering has to stay private, even from your best friends.

"But Marcus gives him such amazing stuff," Mitchell argues in a subdued voice.

"Guilt presents," I offer. "To make up for what he did."

With a guy like Mitchell, you never quite know if you're getting through to him. He's listening, but is it sinking in? Especially when it's coming from me, who he distrusts so much.

He's silent for a long time. Finally, he asks, "Now what?"

"I don't know how much we can help him," I say honestly. "It's complicated. Marcus is his mom's husband."

"We can't just do nothing," Mitchell insists.

"The first thing you can do is tell Evan and Jason." That was my main reason for approaching Mitchell first. All this will sound better coming from him than from me, the outsider. I take a deep breath. "Then we talk to C.J."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

EVAN DONNELLY

"I'm a lousy friend."

I focus my phone light on Jason's unhappy features. "How do you figure that? We're walking through the woods in middle of the night—it'll be a miracle if we don't trip on something and face-plant—all because of what good friends we are."

"Sure." Jason ducks under a low-hanging branch. "C.J. was in trouble, and we were too wrapped up in the fort to even notice. All we did was tell him what a great stepfather he's got. He must have loved that."

The two of us are making our way through the darkness along the main trail. We just left the fort three hours ago. C.J. stayed behind, supposedly to finish up a *Madden* season he was in the middle of. Our plan is to go back at ten and catch him still there. Then he won't be able to deny that he's living at the fort. And he'll have to let us help him. It's not going to be fun, but we have to make it happen.

"Fine—we blew it," I admit. "We believed C.J.'s stories about his death-defiers. We thought Marcus was great because he bought great stuff. We were oblivious, but now we know better. That has to count for something."

"I hope you guys are counting steps," comes Mitchell's voice from Jason's phone.

"Sure we are." Jason grins into the screen, where Mitchell appears on FaceTime.

"I don't hear any numbers," Mitchell warns.

"I'm counting in my head," Jason retorts. "Right now, I'm up to thirteen hundred and thirteen."

"That's not funny!" Mitchell storms.

"If you were here with us, instead of sitting at home," I remind him, "you could do the counting yourself."

"I'm too sick."

"Not half as sick as I am of hearing how sick you are!" Jason retorts, his words booming through the silence of the woods.

Up ahead, another light flashes between tree trunks. "That you guys?" comes Ricky's voice.

"Over here," I call.

Ricky falls in beside us and we continue until we're standing by the trapdoor, wishing we were pretty much anywhere else. No one is looking forward to the conversation that's ahead.

Ricky seems to read my mind. "He'll thank us."

"No he won't," comes Mitchell's voice. "He's going to be mad."

"Here goes nothing." Jason throws open the hatch and we start down the ladder, me in the lead.

C.J. is standing in the kitchen area, emptying a can of Dinty Moore beef stew into a saucepan on the hot plate.

He looks startled. "What are you guys doing here?"

"The real question," Mitchell pipes up from the phone, "is what are *you* doing here?"

"Oh, hey, Mitch." C.J. waves at the screen. "Feeling better?"

"Don't change the subject," Mitchell snaps back.

Frowning, C.J. regards us from face to face to face. "What's this about?"

The silence is so intense that the sound of the air-circulating pump feels like it's roaring inside my head. I'm actually waiting for *Ricky* to speak up, since he's the one who got us started down this uncomfortable road. But it hits me that it's not Ricky's place. *We're* the ones who grew up with C.J., who've known him forever. We *owe* him this tricky conversation, no matter how awful it's shaping up to be.

"Listen, man," I begin, "we *know*. We know your cuts and bruises don't come from death-defiers. We know Marcus has been hurting you. And we know you've been sleeping at the fort."

I'm not sure what I expect him to do, but this isn't it. He laughs. "You guys are bugging."

"So why are you here now?" I challenge. "A *Madden* season doesn't take three hours."

He shrugs. "Time flies when you're having fun. Then I got hungry. I didn't realize how late it was. I'll head home as soon as I eat."

Whatever is going on, it hasn't affected his appetite. He slurps down that stew like a starving shark, in spite of the fact that the rest of us are standing around staring at him.

"You guys are idiots," he tells us between bites. "What, you're going to walk me home to make sure I get there?"

I don't back down. "Sounds like a good idea."

"I agree," Ricky adds.

C.J.'s eyes flash. "Oh, the magnet-school kid agrees. So it must be the smart move."

"I'm coming too," Jason says grimly. "We're all going with you."

"Make sure you wash the dishes first," Mitchell puts in from the phone.

It breaks the ice a little, but not much. We've made it this far. We can't let C.J. off the hook.

I think of the hints, the clues, the chunks of undeniable evidence that have been staring us in the face for so long. How oblivious we must have been! C.J.'s sour look when the rest of us were the Marcus fan club—it never made sense, yet we never wondered why. And the "death-defiers"—C.J. wasn't a wild man or a risk-taker in elementary school. Not until Marcus joined his family. Why didn't we question this dangerous change in a kid we saw every day? We nagged him about the stunts themselves, but it didn't occur to us to investigate the purpose behind them. It took Ricky to put the pieces together. And now that it's out there—as much as we don't want to believe it—we know it's true.

We failed our friend, but not anymore. We've got to rescue him, whether he wants to be rescued or not.

C.J. is sarcastic as he shrugs into his jacket. "Thanks a lot, you guys, for believing me. I thought you were my friends."

"We *are* your friends," I insist. "That's why we're here."

"Could've fooled me. Friends trust each other." He climbs up the ladder and out through the trapdoor.

We follow him, making sure to turn off the power and camouflage the entrance to the fort. We walk behind him in silence, except for the whining and complaining coming over Jason's phone.

"You left that dirty pot in the sink," Mitchell accuses. "You're ruining the whole fort!"

By the lights of our phones, we navigate out of the woods and into C.J.'s neighborhood.

He wheels to face us. "All right, guys. This has gone far enough. I think I can make it home from here without a platoon of bodyguards."

We don't give him an argument. But when he turns and walks on, we're right there with him.

As we press on toward C.J.'s street, I catch a nervous glance from Jason. I understand perfectly. What if we're wrong? We trusted Ricky because he's smart, but he's not really one of us. If all this is Ricky misreading things and jumping to conclusions, then we're making a terrible mistake. It goes without saying that we'll look like jerks. But we'll feel a lot worse than that if C.J. never forgives us. Being ninety-nine percent sure isn't the same as one hundred.

Even Ricky looks a little uncertain as C.J. approaches his block.

Then it happens. As he's about to make the turn, C.J. stops dead in his tracks. He doesn't fall exactly. It's more like he

collapses to the sidewalk, sitting down on the pavement, hugging his knees.

We all see it, but to Mitchell, who's connected via FaceTime, it must have looked like he just vanished from the screen. "Where'd he go?"

"He's here," I supply. "He's just"—my voice cracks a little—"taking a break." I thought I was sure before, but getting confirmation from C.J. himself is more powerful than I expected. This is the kind of thing that happens to faceless strangers in books and movies and unhappy newspaper stories. Yeah, it was bad for Luke and me when Mom and Dad checked out on us, but at least we had Grandma and Grandpa. C.J. isn't that lucky. And the idea that I could have been there for him, could have supported him, but I didn't even notice it was happening—it's so tragic, so shameful that I'm paralyzed for a moment. The only thing that snaps me out of it is one thought: It's too late to help him *then*; I have to help him *now*.

I get down on one knee. "It's okay, man. We've got your back."

"You can't tell anybody," he pleads. He looks up at Jason. "Especially not Janelle. Her dad can't find out."

"I don't know," puts in Ricky. "Maybe a cop is exactly what you need."

C.J. shakes his head vehemently. "No cops! Marcus—I don't know what he'd do to my mom if he thought she called the police."

That explains why C.J. can't just go to his mom for help. She's a fellow victim. I should have seen that too.

"You can stay at my place," I offer. "You don't have to sleep at the fort."

"And mine," Jason adds readily. "*Both* of mine. We can ride double on my bike."

"You can stay with me too," Mitchell adds. "I promise I won't cough on you."

It brings a slight smile out of C.J. "You're not sick."

"We all want to help," Ricky agrees. "I haven't known you as long as these guys, but you can bunk at my house too. My dad's cooking is better than forty-year-old beef stew."

"It won't work," C.J. says sadly. "There's no way we can explain to any of your families why I can't live at home. If they believe me, they'll call the cops, and if they don't believe me, they'll call Marcus. It's a lose-lose."

"You mean we can't do anything?" Mitchell wails. His words sound extra helpless coming from the speaker of Jason's phone.

I put a hand on C.J.'s shoulder. "I'm so sorry, man. I should have seen it. I should have *known*."

Jason squats down beside us. "Why didn't you say something, C.J.?"

"It's not his fault," I insist. "We should have figured it out."

C.J. shakes his head. "I did everything I could to keep it a secret. You think it was fun—those death-defiers? Throwing myself off bikes and down stairs to explain away the bruises Marcus put on me? You guys were embarrassed to admit you got scared by those movies we watched, like *Piranha* and *Jaws*. But the hardest thing to say out loud is that the real monster

lives in your house, and you never know when the next attack is going to happen."

Ricky has been hanging back from all this, probably because he's the outsider. Now he kneels beside us. "How did you think it was going to get better if you didn't tell anybody?"

C.J. shrugs miserably. "At first, I really believed Marcus might change. And when I gave up on that, I figured all I had to do was get older, bigger, stronger, so I could protect myself and my mom." He sighs. "That takes too long. So this is where we are now. My mother won't leave Marcus, and I won't go back to that house. I know you guys want to help, but I'm just in a place where helping doesn't *work*. I'm totally out of luck."

The fact that no one exclaims "No, you're not!" or starts detailing a plan speaks volumes. Even Ricky, who's normally our idea guy, has nothing to offer. C.J.'s right. We can't solve this for him. There are problems that are beyond the power of kids. Somehow, though, we have to get him through this.

We're silent for a long time, huddled there on the pavement.

C.J. is the first to speak. "Let's go home."

Wordlessly, we all get up and start walking.

No one has to ask about our destination.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

C.J. SCIUTTO

The trip back to the fort is the longest walk I've ever taken in my life.

The guys stick with me, though, every step of the way.

I don't remember the exact moment all the trouble began—the first time Marcus hit me. The buildup was gradual—a firm parental hand gives way to a shove, which turns into something worse. There was no official start date. But the minute I realized that what Marcus was doing to me wasn't standard in everybody's house, I came to a conclusion: Nobody could find out about it.

I wasn't embarrassed to be my stepfather's punching bag. I didn't feel guilty, like I must be doing something bad to bring it on. I always understood that the blame belonged to exactly one person: Marcus. It was just *our* thing, *our* family—no one else's business. Growing up, I never told the guys, although we were closer than brothers. We shared everything, but not that—even when I had to start my daredevil career to keep the secret.

I spent years building those walls—and in one night, they've all been blown to bits.

It's terrifying to be exposed. I *hate* the guys for doing this

to me—and I don't care that they think it's for my own good. It's a kind of pain Marcus couldn't put on me no matter how hard he tried.

So everything's out in the open. Years of pretending and scheming and lying and excuses—ripped away like a Band-Aid. How can I face my friends now that they've seen what my world has turned into?

The answer: How can I not? They won't leave!

Evan, Jason, Ricky, and—via FaceTime—Mitchell surround me like Secret Service agents as we tromp through the dark woods. Halfway to the fort, Jason's phone dies, taking Mitchell with it. One by one, the rest of our phones light up, and we can almost hear Mitchell's urgent nagging in our ringtones. How weird is that? The world has practically ended, and the four of are standing amid the trees, laughing because Mitchell is a pain in the neck.

Finally, I answer. "Hey, dude."

Mitchell is almost shouting. "If you think I'm going to let you go through this alone, then *you're* the one who should be failing out of school!"

"Fine," I tell him. "Calm down."

It takes Mitchell's ranting for me to clue in. The guys can't fix my life, but they're *here*. I've still got my problems, but I'm not alone with them anymore.

That tiny bit of comfort disappears when we reach the fort. All at once, I can't handle the idea of being by myself in that hole in the ground, with nothing but the cactus for company. If

there's one thing the past hour has shown me, it's that no plant is a substitute for people who care about you.

I throw open the hatch, hoping that the physical effort will disguise the quiver in my voice. "Well, I guess this is my stop. See you guys at school tomorrow." I throw a leg over the side and my left foot finds the first rung of the ladder.

Evan jumps forward. "Breakfast is at seven at my house. I get up at six thirty, so come any time after that."

"We can go to my place after school," Ricky suggests. "We'll do homework together, and my dad's barbecuing after that."

From the phone, Mitchell adds, "Then come to my house. Mom pulled a twilight shift, so we can hang out late."

"My mother's always bugging me to invite you guys over," Jason puts in. "It helps her pretend everything's normal."

"Okay—uh—sure—uh—bye." The woods blur as tears fill my eyes, and I scramble down the ladder in record time.

I don't mind anymore that they know about Marcus. But I don't want my friends to see me cry.

Three days later, I'm standing in the Donnellys' bathroom, wrapped in a towel. I clear a spot on the steamed mirror and examine the area on my cheek where I slammed into the car after the Hurricanes game. The scab is gone; the redness has faded. My injured ribs don't hurt that much anymore, and my cuts and bruises are mostly healed.

If I was living at home, there's a pretty good chance that those old wounds would be replaced by new ones, courtesy of Marcus. But I'm still sleeping at the fort.

The guys are helping me out. Evan has the best shower. The water is so hot that it's almost like having your own private steam room. Evan says his grandfather likes it that way. Plus they have these super-fuzzy towels. So I've been going there after school to wash up the last couple of days. Tonight, I'm staying for dinner, but I can't sleep over. The chances are too high that Evan's grandmother might call my mom to make sure it's okay. Three minutes later, the knock at the door would be Marcus. He wouldn't risk trying to drag me out of a public place like school, but a private home would be fair game.

I may be free of Marcus for the moment, but the threat of him is always hanging over me. And the guilt of leaving Mom alone with him is even worse. Now that he hasn't got me to push around, what if all that anger gets transferred to her? Is my escape putting her in danger? I have to force thoughts like that out of my head to keep functioning.

When I can wrestle away the dread, I try to focus on the little things, like getting out of a hot shower and putting on clean clothes. I've never been a neat freak, but I'm really starting to appreciate it. Evan's been sneaking my stuff in with his laundry, since we're more or less the same size. So far, we've been getting away with it, but at dinner, Evan's grandmother comments, "Have you kids got some kind of dress code? Evan has a shirt just like that."

Evan and I practically break our necks whipping around to

see if Luke picked up on that. But he's wearing his usual scowl and concentrating on a bowl of soup.

That's the downside of spending too much time at Evan's. Luke is there, and Luke is one half of the team of Luke and Jaeger. He usually ignores us like we don't exist, but I worry about him noticing how much I'm hanging around lately.

Later that night, I point to the gold-rimmed china plates on the display rail in the Donnelly dining room and comment, "Hey, don't these dishes remind you of Bennett Delamere's stuff?"

Luke breaks through the saloon doors from the kitchen. "What do you shrimps know about Bennett Delamere's stuff?"

At home, Luke normally looks half-asleep, like he's bored himself ninety percent of the way into a coma. But he's wide awake now. If he had dog ears, they'd be standing straight up.

Evan tries to bluster our way out of it. "He just means—you know—the Delameres are all rich. So they probably own a lot of fancy junk like that."

Luke isn't buying it. "Is that where all the money is coming from? Are you swiping stuff from the Delameres?"

"I don't think there are any Delameres in Canaan anymore," I put in. "Didn't they all move away back when Bennett died?"

"Tell me!" Luke snarls.

"We can't tell you, because there's nothing to tell!" Evan insists, his voice high-pitched. "There isn't any money, Luke! I've told you a thousand times."

"Listen to me!" A subtle change comes over Luke. He's not

interrogating us anymore. It's almost like he's pleading. "You can't keep this secret forever. Jaeger's going to worm it out of you, one way or another. You want to deal with me, or you want to deal with him? Don't push him too hard—he could hurt you to get what he wants!"

Evan and I exchange a nervous look. That was a threat, but a warning too.

We always considered Luke to be fifty percent of the enemy. But this is a new view of his partnership with Jaeger. Luke's in, and he doesn't know how to get himself out. He's afraid of the guy.

And if Luke's afraid, how are *we* supposed to feel?

I'm not just spending time at the Donnellys'. The guys are spreading me around between all their houses so I don't wear out my welcome anywhere. The dance gets kind of tricky. I can only go to Jason's when he's living with his mother, since his dad's apartment is so far away. I can't risk sneaking my bike out of the garage—Marcus would notice that, and it would give him a whole new way to track me.

Mitchell's house is another option. His mom officially ran out of patience with his un-sickness, so he's back at school—which means he can have friends over again. He still won't come to the fort, though. Talk about stubborn. He insists he might have "leftover germs," and he doesn't want to contaminate the place.

Ricky's house works too, except I have to be extra quiet around the baby, and because Ricky is still studying for the entrance exam for that new magnet school, which is coming up next week.

I know we all razz Ricky about the magnet thing, but it's kind of impressive how hard he's hitting the books. His room looks like a college library, with thousand-page texts on every surface and Post-it notes scattered like snowflakes. The last time I went to the bathroom there, I found an atlas balanced on the toilet seat open to a giant foldout relief map of the Himalayas.

The kid must be crazy smart, although I can't be sure. I'm not smart enough to recognize that level of smartness. Anyway, Ricky was the one with the brains to figure out what's going on with my stepfather and me, so I owe him big-time.

"If you get into that school," I ask in awe, "is this a taste of what the homework's going to be like?"

He shrugs. "Pretty much. And I'll probably get kicked back down to seventh grade too."

"Man, we'll never see you!"

He shoots me a wry smile. "The guys will be devastated. Especially Mitchell."

I feel a pang. We didn't exactly go out of our way to make Ricky feel welcome. If he hadn't been the one who found the fort, he would have been out on his butt.

"Yeah, well, promise you'll make a little bit of time for us," I request. "You know, in your genius-hood."

"Sure," he says. "And we'll always see each other at the fort."

The fort. Now that I'm basically living there, I'm starting to cherish every moment I'm someplace else. Just like the fort started out as our escape from our regular lives, now I wish I had a second fort to get away from the first. Or maybe it's the regular life that I long to get back to—a real one, where I don't have to be afraid all the time.

I miss my mom, but mostly I'm worried about her. Ricky keeps researching these hotlines that are run by organizations that support victims of domestic abuse. They sound legit, but I'm afraid to call. What if Marcus gets wind of it somehow?

I know exactly what would happen then. He'd go berserk. And I'd be totally safe at Ricky's, leaving her in the line of fire.

From Ricky's it's back to Mitchell's—his place is the nighttime hangout, thanks to Mrs. Worth's late shifts. It's after eleven when I finally leave him to head to the fort, and Canaan is gloomy and deserted. The roar of a big motor in the distance makes my skin crawl. I'm being paranoid—there's more than one unmuffled engine in town. But this one sounds a whole lot like Jaeger's Mustang. And it's the right time of night for jerks like him who are looking for trouble to get into.

As I hurry along, some streets are so dark that I'm tempted to turn on the flashlight on my phone. I resist the impulse. That app eats power. If my phone dies in the blackness of the woods, I'll never find the fort.

When at last I reach the cover of the trees, an unsettling

sight catches my squinting eyes. A car is parked about fifty yards down from the trail entrance. *The* car. Jaeger's Mustang.

A stab of fear pulses through me. Does this mean they're lurking somewhere near the trailhead, waiting to intercept one of us? They've made no secret of the fact that they believe we're hiding something important—and moneymaking—in the woods. Or maybe they're out there already, searching, hoping to find their prize the same way we did—by stumbling on it.

My first thought is I can't go any farther; then I realize that I can't stay here either. Sooner or later, Luke and Jaeger will come back to the car and see me. I could find someplace to lie low until they leave, but that might not be for hours. My best option is just to head for the fort. The woods are a big place. Chances are they won't catch me. Plus I know where I'm going and they don't.

I start out slowly, without my phone light, keeping to the edge of the trail, in case I have to duck behind a bush or something. My ears don't pick up any unusual sounds. That has to be good news. Jaeger is as silent as a snake, but Luke is usually yammering a mile a minute. I haven't gone very far before the darkness is total and smothering. I can't even see my feet on the path. I'm navigating with my hand along the underbrush, like I'm following a fence.

It gets so bad that I have to flash my phone on for a second or two, just to get my bearings. I don't dare leave the light on any longer than that, though. In this kind of blackness, that would be like holding up a signal flare and yelling, "Here I am! Come and get me!"

My progress is slow, and I admit I'm pretty scared. At this rate, I won't make it to the fort until it's time for school tomorrow. I flash my light one more time, struggling to memorize the twists and turns of the trail ahead. But when the darkness surrounds me again, I notice something that nearly stops my heart. Another light plays through the maze of trees to my left. It can only be Luke and Jaeger!

I freeze and stop breathing for I don't know how long. Now I hear voices.

Luke: "I hate bugs! Why do there always have to be bugs?"

And Jaeger: "Shut up."

One of them must have a powerful flashlight. Every time it moves, hundreds of shadows cascade through the woods. I duck behind the biggest tree I can find, but it's no use. The light is everywhere, and I can't really tell what direction they're coming from.

The urge to sprint down the path toward the fort is almost overwhelming, but I fight it down. The last thing I'm trying to do is lead these jerks exactly where they want to go. I cower in place as their flashlight casts shadows dancing around the woods, closing in on me. All at once, the shadows stop moving, and the beam is blinding.

Luke's voice: "There's one of them!"

I unfreeze in a hurry and make for the darkest part of the woods at a pace that's beyond dangerous. Roots and underbrush snatch at my ankles, and branches scratch my face and arms, but I don't slow down. Anything is better than falling into the hands of these two.

"Come back, C.J.!" Luke calls, panting with exertion.

"We just want to talk!" Jaeger adds.

Oh yeah, I know exactly what they want to talk about. I've already decided that even if they catch me, I'm not going to give up the fort.

Luke and Jaeger have longer legs, but I have the edge in experience in these woods. I can tell, because their flashlight beam has grown dimmer and more dispersed around me. The downside is, now it's harder for me to see where I'm going. The branches and tree trunks fly out of the darkness at me like I'm playing some crazy video game.

The curses and threats grow fainter as Luke and Jaeger fall farther behind. I'm almost congratulating myself on a spectacular escape when it happens. The branch comes out of nowhere and clotheslines me across the chest, dropping me on the spot. The impact is so shocking that it takes me a few seconds to realize that I'm on my back. At the last second, I have the presence of mind to roll into some underbrush. There I lie, gasping into my fist as the light becomes brighter and the footfalls get so close that I can feel them rattling the ground.

I press myself into the soft earth and wait for the moment when I'm hauled upright by the scruff of the neck.

It doesn't come.

I don't know how close they are when they run by me. It can't be more than ten feet. They pass right on and keep going. How do they miss me? I have no idea, but they do. Maybe when you think you're chasing somebody, the last place you look for them is straight down.

I can still hear Luke and Jaeger crashing through the trees for at least another seven or eight minutes before they realize they've lost me. That's followed by a heated argument about what went wrong. I swear I'd laugh out loud if I wasn't so terrified they'd hear me.

I lie there for what seems like forever after they've argued their way out of earshot. There's no way to tell if they've given up, if they're still searching, or even if they're trying to retrace their steps to see where they lost me. It hits me that I'll have to lie here for the rest of my life, mud-caked and being eaten by bugs, before I can ever be entirely sure I'm in the clear—not a very pleasant thought.

I'm about ready to jump out of my skin when I hear the most beautiful sound that anyone in my position could hear: the distant roar of the Mustang starting up again.

I struggle to my feet, raining dirt in all directions. Two beady eyes gleam at me in the darkness and I risk the light. Not Jaeger; not Luke—an angry chipmunk woken from a deep sleep.

"It's a long story," I mumble, and set off for the main trail.

Now that I can use my light, finding the fort is easy enough. Once I'm down the ladder and the power is on, I can see what a mess I am. Every step rains mud, leaves, and twigs down onto the floor. As exhausted as I am, I take time to clean it up.

When I catch sight of myself in the mirror in the kitchen, I realize that I need some cleanup too. And while I'm sponging off at the sink, I wonder why a rich guy like Bennett Delamere didn't think he needed a shower in his bomb shelter. Maybe the

idea was that, if you can survive a whole world war, being clean is the least of your worries.

Well, I never made it through a war. But when I think about what happened tonight, *survive* seems like a pretty good word for it. When I finally lie down on the couch, I'm wide-awake and still shaking.

How much longer am I going to be able to live like this?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MITCHELL WORTH

I never should have eaten that chocolate chip cookie without counting the chips first. I'll bet there were thirteen. Why else would my mother—who supposedly loves me—force me to go back to school?

How can I explain to her all the dangers that are waiting for me out there? Every morning, I'm terrified that I won't make it ten feet from the house before Luke and Jaeger are all over me. They'll try to make me tell them about the fort—which is *never* going to happen. But if they get mad enough, they'll turn me in to the police for watering Dr. Breckinridge's plants. Mom will be sorry when she has to come and visit me in jail, where we have to talk through bulletproof glass and that phone thingy. She'd better not bring chocolate chip cookies, that's for sure.

On Wednesday, my luck goes from bad to even more bad. I walk into school and Mrs. Beauregard reminds me that I missed this big state test when I was out. Guess what: The retake is today.

"No fair!" I protest. "How can I have a test already? I didn't have a chance to study!"

"It's not that kind of test, Mitchell," she informs me.

"But what if I don't know the answers?"

"There are no wrong answers," she assures me in a soothing tone.

Don't believe it. There are wrong answers to everything. That's why my papers always come back with big red *X*s all over them.

School is such a scam. They trick you until your head spins. Like, normally, I'm begging to get *out* of class. Now they've got me begging to stay *in* so I don't have to take this test, which sounds really hard.

And they won't even give me that. Mrs. Beauregard walks me down to the library to make sure I get there. That shows what she knows. I'm not going to run away from school. Luke and Jaeger could be out there, waiting to scoop me up.

There's already another kid in the test-taking area. Wouldn't you know it? Ricky.

"Hi, Mitchell."

"What are you doing here?" I demand. "You weren't out sick last week."

"I'm taking the admission test for the new magnet school," he supplies.

I wheel on Mrs. Beauregard. "You lied! I can't pass a magnet-school test!"

She's starting to sound impatient. "It's all right, Mitchell. His test is different from yours."

Great. Now I can't even copy off the smart kid.

Mrs. Beauregard sets me up with my paper, says the librarian will be checking on us regularly, and leaves me there, filling in ovals.

There's a buzz of low conversation in the library, which is never good for me. It's like I'm trying to listen to everybody at the same time, which makes my brain hurt and slows down my oval filling. Eventually, I get so confused that I have to talk to drown out the other voices. It's like an urgent need—even when the only person to talk to is Ricky.

"I wasn't really sick."

He stops writing in his test booklet and whispers, "So why were you faking?"

Maybe it's because Ricky isn't really my friend, but I just confess. "They're blackmailing me."

"Who is?"

"Luke and Jaeger. They caught me—doing something bad. And now they're threatening to get me arrested."

That captures his attention. "Arrested?"

It draws a sharp *"Shhh!"* from the librarian, and we return to our test papers.

A class enters to return laptops to a rolling cart. Evan spies us and sidles over.

"Mitchell's a criminal," Ricky informs him in a low voice.

"I am not!" I hiss. "I just might have to go to jail, that's all!"

"For what?" Evan asks in amazement.

"If you must know, Luke and Jaeger caught me watering my plants."

Ricky is mystified. "What's illegal about watering plants?"

Evan snickers. "You're going to magnet school and you haven't figured it out yet? They're not his plants, and he doesn't use real water."

I desperately signal Evan to zip his lip, but he goes right ahead and blabs about me peeing on Dr. Breckinridge's beloved herb garden. He tells the whole story with me sitting right there, even though it's as plain as the nose on your face that Ricky is my enemy. He might even be my archenemy, except Luke and Jaeger are that.

Ricky looks stunned for a second. Then he starts to laugh out loud, which makes me even more humiliated.

"Shhh!" The librarian is looking right at us.

Ricky and I bury our noses in our tests.

"Nobody goes to jail for peeing on a garden," Ricky murmurs when the librarian turns his back. "Mitchell, don't worry about Jaeger talking to the police. A guy like that doesn't go near cops. He's hoping they forget he even exists."

I feel like a giant weight has been lifted off my chest. I feel like I just stepped on a crack, but Mom's back is totally fine. I feel like I was locked in a dungeon and Ricky, the outsider, handed me the key.

"I can go back to the fort!" I exclaim.

Evan turns serious. "That's what I came to tell you guys. C.J. got ambushed by my brother and Jaeger in the woods last night."

"Is he okay?" Ricky asks in alarm.

"He got away, but he's pretty scratched up from running through the trees. Here's the thing—he says those guys couldn't have been more than a football field away from the fort. You know what that means—"

"That's enough!" The librarian snatches up Ricky's booklet

and pencil and leads him away from our table. "You're going to take this test in the conference room . . ."

I can't suppress a satisfied smirk. This might be the first time the magnet-school kid ever got in trouble.

Evan's grave expression reminds me that there's nothing to smile about. "Luke and Jaeger are getting close."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

C.J. SCIUTTO

Mom calls me about twenty times a day—sometimes crying, sometimes begging, sometimes barking orders. The message is always the same, though: I have to come home.

"I want to come home and I will," I tell her again and again. "As soon as Marcus is gone."

"You're asking me to break up our family," she protests.

"That's exactly what I'm asking. It's a nightmare and you know it."

"I love Marcus and we both love you!"

"Bye, Mom," I say, and hang up.

Believe me. It takes a lot of willpower to blow her off like that. The longer I'm gone, the more scared I am about her safety. I've passed along the helpline numbers Ricky found. I've told her if she leaves him, there are places we can go. But she doesn't listen.

Forty-five seconds later, she calls back: Marcus is a new man. He misses me terribly. Our family has nothing but good times ahead.

I refuse to go down that road. "If Marcus won't leave," I insist, "you have to leave him."

She changes the subject. "Where are you living? With your friends? I can find out, you know. I can speak to their mothers."

"Bye, Mom."

That's one threat I'm not worried about. Our family issues have always been a deep, dark secret. Mom would never call my friends' families for fear that they might ask me what's been happening in our house. She knows I would tell the truth. I'm done with lying.

During school hours, when talking is out, Mom bombards me with texts. I can ignore the vibrating in my pocket for only so long. In most of the messages, she's just trying to make sure I'm okay. It can't be easy to have your kid basically take off on you. Part of me feels awful for putting her through this.

Marcus texts me too—everything from *How can u do this to ur mother?* to *Come home, son. The house is so empty without u* to *Ur going to pay for what u put us through.*

Too late, Marcus. I block him, and I'm amazed I didn't think of it sooner. I was smart enough to disable phone tracking the minute I started sleeping at the fort. Why didn't I realize it would have been just as easy to stop his calls and texts?

If only it was that simple to cut him out of my life.

I'm officially broke, so I can't buy school lunch anymore.

Pawning Bennett Delamere's cutlery is out of the question, now that we know from Janelle that the cops are snooping around for it.

Yesterday I brought a can of Hormel chili from the fort in a brown paper bag. The problem was I forgot to open it—those ancient tins don't have pull tabs. I had to ask one of the lunch ladies for a can opener.

She took one look at the forty-year-old label and cried, "I haven't seen one of these since I was a kid!"

Obviously, flashing around fort food—with its retro labels—is a bad idea. So today the guys donate bits and pieces of their own lunches to share with me. Four quarter-sandwiches equal one sandwich, if you don't mind a ham/tuna/cheese/peanut butter combo. I appreciate the variety, but it leaves me a little hungry because I only eat parts of things instead of a whole thing.

Ricky says it's all in my head. "When you think about it, you have more than any of us. We just get three-quarters, after what we give to you. But you've got four quarters, which is a whole sandwich."

"Hey, yeah!" Mitchell grabs the walnut square from my tray. "I'm confiscating this brownie in the name of food fairness."

"*Half* brownie." Evan breaks off a piece and pops it into his mouth.

Jason turns to Mitchell, who is chewing on his own half. "Did you remember to count the walnuts?"

Mitchell looks like he's downed a live toad that's hopping around just below his Adam's apple. We're all laughing our heads off. That's when I spot her—my mother, standing in the doorway, searching the lunch crowd for me.

At the sight of her, I jump up and run toward her. But as

I approach, my feet start to drag. This can only be another attempt to get me to come home to Marcus. She'll have some trumped-up piece of "evidence" that he's turned over a new leaf—he's bought me another laptop, he's taking anger management classes, he cries himself to sleep at night because he misses me so much.

Well, none of that's going to work. By the time I reach her, my expression has hardened to stone.

Her anxious eyes search my face. "You look good, C.J.—*better.*"

I'm not in the mood to discuss the advantages of the Donnellys' shower and laundry room, or the hospitality and generosity of my friends. "I know what you're going to ask and the answer is still no."

She shakes her head vehemently. "That's not it. I came to tell you you're right. We both need to get away from"—she won't say the name—"*him.*"

That's when I notice that she's wearing a lot of pancake makeup covering her left eye, and that the skin is puffy and doesn't quite match the rest of her face.

"He hit you," I blurt. The words sound hollow in my own ears. Of course he hit her. He's Marcus. Hitting people is what he does. All you have to do to qualify as a victim is be weaker and within reach.

Her reply confuses me at first. "It's not your fault."

Why would she say that? Of course it's not *my* fault. *Marcus* is the one who hit her. But no sooner has that idea crossed my mind than I realize it's totally my fault. I'm the one who left her

alone with him. I knew what he was; I have the scars to prove it. I could have protected her. Not that I could ever stand up to a tank like Marcus. But at least when I'm around, he focuses his rage on me instead of her. What was I thinking? How could I be so stupid? So *selfish*?

"What do we do?" I'm trying to sound strong, but my voice comes out high-pitched and shaky, like a little kid's.

"I'll figure it out," she promises. "I just need time to plan, to make some calls to those helplines. Marcus doesn't suspect anything yet. But the minute he realizes I've left him, he's going to come looking for me."

Suddenly, I feel confidence surging in me. "I might know a place we can go. Wait here!"

I spin on my heel and race back to the table, where the guys are all on their feet, watching me nervously.

Jason is the first to find his voice. "Is your mom okay?"

I picture her eye—the caked-on makeup and the swelling it's meant to hide. *Okay* is the last word I'd use to describe it. But at the same time, a ray of light has broken through the black clouds. She's finally doing it. She's leaving Marcus.

"She's—better," I reply. "At least, she will be."

Ricky speaks slowly and carefully. "You're not going home with her, are you? I mean, home to—"

I shake my head. "Listen, you guys, I have to ask you something, and it's kind of huge. I need your permission to bring one more person into the fort."

Mitchell's eyes are wide. "Your mom?"

I don't answer, but in that instant, they all understand

perfectly, even Mitchell. The fort has always been our refuge; now it's going to be someone's refuge for real. And the stakes have never been higher.

"You understand what this means, right?" I probe. "The first rule of the fort was always no adults. Once the grown-up world knows it's out there—"

I pause to let it sink in. Adults talk to other adults—fellow parents, police, town officials, safety inspectors. Taking Mom to the fort could be the first step toward losing it forever.

Evan puts a hand on my shoulder. "Do it, man."

"Whatever it takes," Jason adds.

"Some things are more important than forts," puts in Mitchell. "Even really, really good ones."

It takes pretty amazing friends to risk the greatest thing they've ever had to help you when you need it. It's something I'll never forget.

Ricky regards me with a solemn gaze: "Good luck, C.J."

My glance finds Mom in the cafeteria entrance. We're going to need all the luck we can get.

Mom has an overnight bag in her car. The sight of it makes my heart soar. It means this is really happening. At long last, we're going to get free of Marcus. At the same time, it's terrifying. Marcus is awful, but at least we knew how our old life worked. We're heading off into a future we can't predict. And there's

also the fear that, if Marcus finds us, the payback will be more than either of us can handle.

We leave the car a few blocks from the woods and walk the rest of the way. As we move along the main trail, deeper and deeper into the trees, Mom is looking at me like I've lost my mind. "Where *is* this fort of yours?"

"Not far now," I promise. "You have to see it to believe it."

"I feel like Little Red Riding Hood on my way to Grandma's house," she says with a nervous laugh.

"You'll be safe there," I assure her. "There's no way Marcus can ever find this place."

She's wide-eyed and silent as I pull away the branches, revealing the trapdoor. I take her bag and drop it to the bottom. Then I help her down the ladder and flip the power switch. With a clunk, the lights come on, revealing the fort in all its glory.

She draws in an amazed breath. The guys are used to the fort, especially me, since I've been living in it. But seeing it through her eyes takes me back to that day after the hurricane when we first stumbled on it. Magic.

"What *is* this place?"

"It's Bennett Delamere's bomb shelter," I supply. "Near as we can figure out, he built it to survive World War Three. And he didn't plan to share it with anyone, because nobody seems to know about it but us."

"Bennett Delamere," she echoes. "I haven't heard that name in years! People say he was a pretty weird agent, although I never imagined anything like this."

I show her some of the features of the fort—the fancy plates and cutlery, the pantry full of canned goods, the vinyl records and videotapes that aren't just from before my time, but before her time too.

I catch her looking at the couch, where an indentation in the cushion looks suspiciously like the seat of my pants. "Is this where you've been living, C.J.?"

"I've been bouncing between the guys' houses," I admit. "But this is where I sleep."

She's tearful. "I'm so sorry that I allowed this to happen to you."

I have to give her credit, though. She's tough. She doesn't waste much energy on regrets. It took her a long time to leave Marcus, but now she's in this with both feet. She has a cousin in Atlanta we can stay with, and another in New Jersey. Atlanta's closer, but Marcus knows the address, so he might come after us there. Then there's the problem that Mom's job is in Canaan. How's she going to support us if we have to leave town? And come to think of it, why are *we* the ones who have to go when all this is Marcus's fault in the first place?

I watch her, huddled over her phone, calling lawyers and women's shelters, leaving messages and jotting down notes. She seems like she knows what she's doing. But then I picture six-foot-three Marcus. All the planning in the world might not help us if we're unlucky enough to come face-to-face with him.

There's so much to be hopeful about. And so much to be afraid of.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

RICKY MOLINA

Classes? What classes?

None of us can concentrate on school knowing what C.J. and his mom are doing right now. There can be only one reason he'd want our blessing to take his mother to the fort: She's hiding from her husband.

Marcus, the ultimate good guy, who turns out not to be a good guy after all. It's so gigantic, so earthshaking, that we can't think of anything else.

I stumble through the afternoon like a zombie, while teachers make sarcastic comments about how clueless I am.

"What's the matter, Ricky?" Mr. Kanciper asks me as I stand at the whiteboard, fumbling with a geometry problem. "Did you leave your mind in an undisclosed location?"

The class laughs at me, but not Evan. He knows exactly where my mind is, because his mind is in the same place—in Bennett Delamere's bomb shelter.

We spend the rest of the school day texting C.J. for updates. By dismissal, the four of us have sent him thirty-seven messages—twenty-three from Mitchell alone.

We get a grand total of two replies: *At Peru* when C.J. and his mom first make it to the fort, and about an hour later, *No news.*

"No news?" Mitchell wails in the class change before ninth period. "No *fair*! How can he tell us *nothing*?"

"Maybe there's nothing to tell," I suggest.

"Mitchell's right," Jason puts in. "Not knowing what's going on is pretty frustrating."

"It's worse when you're me!" Mitchell complains. "That's what OCD is—you have no choice but to obsess on stuff."

"This time we're with you one hundred percent," I assure him. "We're all pretty obsessed about C.J. and his mom right now."

When the final bell rings, we meet in the hall to discuss what to do.

"What do you mean, what to do?" Mitchell demands. "The only question is why we're not doing it *already*. We're going to the fort, right?"

I'm hesitant. "I don't know. If C.J. wanted us, he would have asked. It's a pretty sensitive thing when your family breaks up."

"Tell me about it," Jason groans.

"Well, I'm going," Evan says decisively. "If they don't need me, I'll leave. But I have to make the offer."

That makes sense to the rest of us. The plan: Evan, Mitchell, and I will start out for the fort. Jason, who's meeting Janelle, promises to join us ASAP, and takes off.

No sooner have we left the school than an all-too-familiar unmuffled engine blasts its roar from the pickup line. There, among the SUVs and minivans, sits the Mustang, bouncing up and down as Jaeger pumps the brake.

"Oh no!" Mitchell moans. "We can't go to the fort now. They'll follow us!"

"Unless we can give them the slip," Evan adds.

Mitchell is unconvinced. "How are we going to do that? They have a *car*!"

"I have an idea," I tell them. "Do you think you can keep those guys distracted for a few minutes?"

Mitchell is dismayed. "What? How?"

"I've got a bone to pick about Luke hanging his dirty socks on the doorknob," Evan says determinedly. "And I can't think of a better time to make a big deal out of it than right now."

"Do it!" I start along the circular drive until I'm behind the Mustang. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Evan and Mitchell approach the car.

Perfect—nobody's watching me. I reach down to the edge of the driveway and scoop up two big clumps of earth and grass. Then, staying low so I can't be seen in the mirrors, I come up behind the car.

I can hear Jaeger's voice over the low thrum of the engine. "Well, if it isn't Mitchell Worthless, my favorite sprinkler system. Irrigated any vegetables lately?"

"They weren't vegetables, they were herbs!" Mitchell stammers. "I mean—no."

"So what do you say, Luke?" Evan demands. "Will you clean up your socks, or do I have to tell Grandma?"

That's when I reach the back of the Mustang and jam the handfuls of sod into the twin tailpipes. The fit is better than

I could have hoped for. It rained last night, so the dirt is like wet cement, completely blocking both openings. Then I get up and run, slapping Evan and Mitchell on the shoulders as I pass between them. They're hot on my heels.

As we sprint along the drive, I hear the Mustang's big engine swell. I can't resist peering over my shoulder to watch the red sports car squeal out of line, make it a few yards, and stall out, blocking the roadway. It's one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen.

Mitchell is amazed. "What did you do to them?"

"Keep running," I pant. "If those guys pull the mud out of their tailpipes, they're going to come after us!"

We dash through town, cutting across backyards and hopping fences, just in case our pursuers have figured out how to get the Mustang started again. We don't slow down until we're safely on the wooded path to the fort.

I entertain them by explaining how a car motor needs air to work. "If the exhaust gases can't get out the tailpipe, there's no room for fresh air to get into the combustion chamber, and the engine dies."

"Forever?" Mitchell asks fearfully.

I shake my head. "It'll be fine once they clear out the exhaust pipes. But so many things can go wrong on a car that it might take them a while to figure out what the problem is."

"Which gives us the time to get away," Evan adds with satisfaction.

Mitchell shoots me a look that's almost respect. It's a first.

When we reach the fort, we don't even bother climbing up

the lookout tree to search for Luke and Jaeger. We know exactly where they are—stalled out, blocking the middle school driveway, with a whole lot of angry parents stuck behind them.

We open up the trapdoor and let ourselves in.

C.J. rushes over to the ladder to block our way. "You guys shouldn't have come!"

Behind him, we can see Mrs. Sciutto on the couch, talking into her cell phone.

"We want to help," Evan offers.

"This is *private*," C.J. insists.

His mother stands up. "Nothing's private anymore. C.J., let them in."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EVAN DONNELLY

You don't have to explain to me why C.J.'s acting weird about us being here.

When Mom and Dad went into rehab, I didn't want anybody to know—and *everybody* knew. In a town the size of Canaan, that kind of gossip is like there's a town crier standing under your window, screaming it to the four winds. I could see it in the eyes of people who were practically strangers: *There they are. The Donnelly boys. They're with the grandparents now . . . No, the parents are still alive. They just care more about getting high than raising their own sons.* The mail carrier, the crossing guard at elementary school, the ticket taker at the movies. It was like having your chest split open and the whole town having a periscope trained on your insides. The most private parts of you are on the tip of everybody's tongue. And not because they give a hoot, but because it's interesting, juicy, even fun—for them.

I hated it. It was humiliating—and that wasn't the worst part. It's one thing to be embarrassed because your shorts split in gym class. But when the embarrassment comes because your whole world is crashing and burning, that's more agony than any kid should have to deal with. I liked Grandma and

Grandpa okay, but my *parents* were gone without so much as a backward glance at Luke and me.

I didn't even want my friends to find out—guys I'd been closer than close with as long as I could remember. It was Luke who told me, "If your friends are real friends, they won't give you a hard time." And he was right. To this day, they never bring up the subject except to support me when I need to talk about it. Not even Mitchell, who normally can't keep his mouth shut about anything. *That's* friendship.

Those are the kind of guys you share a fort with.

I still think about those dark days a lot. Sometimes it feels like I haven't totally gotten over them. And they come back to me with a vengeance while Mrs. Sciutto is explaining how they're finally leaving Marcus, but they have to be careful, because he can be really dangerous. I look at C.J.—scared and humiliated, everything he ever considered secret laid open like a book for anyone to read. And I ache for him so deeply that it's like my own worst times starting all over again.

"Listen, man," I tell him, hoping my voice isn't as husky as it sounds inside my head. "I know what it's like to be caught up in something that's out of your control." He glances away, so I add, "I *remember*."

His eyes widen a little, and I realize that he's never made the connection before. On the surface, this Marcus business is completely different from what happened with my parents. But to be a kid twisting in the wind—suffering the consequences yet powerless to change the outcome—yeah, I can relate to that.

"Anything we can do to help, just ask," Ricky chimes in.

"Or you could ask one of your *real* friends," Mitchell volunteers, glaring at Ricky.

C.J. doesn't notice the tension between them. "Thanks, guys," he mumbles without meeting our eyes.

I get it. Some things are just too uncomfortable. How must it feel to stand there in front of your friends while your mom calls women's shelters, looking for a place to hide? To make matters worse, Marcus is home from work now, and he seems to sense that something's up. He's bombarding his wife with endless calls, leaving messages that are growing increasingly agitated. Obviously, Mrs. Sciutto doesn't play them for us, but it's impossible to ignore the anger spilling out of the phone. He's furious, threatening. The constant ping-ping-ping of his texts echoing in the confined space is driving *me* crazy, so I can only imagine what it must be doing to C.J. and his mom.

I think back to C.J.'s daredevil career, and the injuries we believed were coming from those stunts—the scrapes, the bruises, the black eyes, the almost-broken ribs. We rolled our eyes, even laughed, when our friend showed up sporting yet another bloody nose or a cut that went halfway to the bone. But now that we know the real source of the damage, hearing that enraged voice secondhand is enough to drop a cold silence over all of us.

Dangerous—that's the word Mrs. Sciutto used to describe her husband.

If it wasn't for the fort, C.J. and his mom would have had no place to run to. Their very safety depended on Ricky

randomly noticing a metal hatch in the underbrush on the day after Hurricane Leo. He could so easily have missed it, and then where would we be?

I try to put a comforting hand on C.J.'s shoulder. He's too uptight and shrugs me away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JASON BRAX

"So what do you think?"

"About what?"

Don't get me wrong: Having a girlfriend is awesome ninety-eight percent of the time. But at a moment like this—with C.J. in trouble—it's kind of hard for me to keep up with my conversation with Janelle. I'm *listening*; I'm just not hearing all that much, because my mind is a million miles away, stressing over C.J. and his mom.

"About beanbag chairs," she replies, regarding me earnestly.

Beanbag chairs? What is she talking about? Man, my listening skills must be even worse than I thought! "Well," I venture, "they're okay . . ."

The two of us are in the woods, walking on the main trail. That's why I'm so distracted. I have to get to the fort to see what's going on with C.J. Now it dawns on me for the first time that she expects to go to the fort too—which *might* be okay, depending on the C.J. situation. But I have no way of knowing that unless I call the guys—which I can't do in front of Janelle.

Janelle stops and faces me. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Uh—beanbag chairs?"

"The fort only has one couch. And since there are six of us using it now, there's not enough room for everybody to sit. Like to watch a movie. Or just chat."

Chat? That must be a girl thing. Guys don't chat.

"Beanbag chairs are the perfect answer," she goes on. "They're comfortable, and they fit in tight spaces. We have two in our basement that nobody's using. Maybe one of the guys has an extra."

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a tape measure. She's actually going to size up the fort for beanbag space. Her eyes are shining like she's just cured a terrible disease and expects a Nobel Prize or something.

We're almost at the termite stump when, suddenly, two figures are blocking our path. Luke and Jaeger.

"Funny the people you run into in the middle of bumblewipe nowhere," Jaeger drawls without looking up from trimming his fingernails with his pocketknife.

"You probably shouldn't be carrying that," Janelle observes quietly. "There are laws about how long those things can be."

Jaeger eyes her so intently that it makes me nervous. "Guess I forgot to bring my ruler."

I have to give Janelle credit. She doesn't flinch. "Want to borrow mine?" She produces her tape measure and holds it out to him.

Jaeger has to be taken aback by that, but he hides it well. Mean people can do that.

"Where are you guys going?" Luke asks us.

I shrug. "Just walking." It doesn't come out as casual as I meant it to.

"If you're looking for your picnic table," Jaeger sneers, "you're way off course."

"I can't take a walk in the woods with my girlfriend?" I demand.

"That's not what you're doing," Luke counters. "You're going to join my stupid brother and the rest of the geek squad."

Janelle gestures around the trees. "Where's there to meet around here?"

"You tell us," Luke shoots back.

Jaeger folds up the knife and slides it into his pocket. "What he said—that wasn't a request. We've been patient so far, but this is starting to *irk* me." The *k* sound makes a little snap in his throat. "Where is this so-called hideout of yours?"

The two of them begin to step toward us. I'm not embarrassed to admit that I'm shaking in my sneakers. Not only am I going to get the snot beaten out of me, but how am I going to protect Janelle? I've got a hold on her wrist and I'm tugging her in the direction of the trail behind us, hoping that she understands my message—run away and I'll try to hold them off.

Turns out, my girlfriend doesn't need as much protecting as I thought. Luke and Jaeger don't scare her anywhere near as much as they scare me.

She flashes her phone. "The pound key is a panic button straight to my dad. Should I press it?"

Luke and Jaeger stop their advance. "Well played, kid," Jaeger says mildly. "But the game's not over yet."

We turn and walk away from them. Every few steps, I glance over my shoulder to confirm that they're not following. They watch us for a while, scowling. Then the path doglegs and we lose sight of them.

"Where to now?" Janelle whispers.

"Keep walking," I murmur. "Anywhere but you-know-where. We can't go near the fort until we're sure they're long gone."

CHAPTER THIRTY

C.J. SCIUTTO

Mom still hasn't found a shelter for us to stay at. "There just aren't that many of them around, C.J.," she explains.

She acts as if it's a minor inconvenience, like traffic or spotty Wi-Fi, and I reply, "Yeah, Mom, no biggie." But I can tell it's really stressing her out. That goes double for me. We've been at this all afternoon, and she's contacting places that are farther and farther away. What if it turns out there's nowhere for us to go?

It's torture to watch her on the phone, getting passed along from hold to hold. Plus every time the call waiting beeps—Marcus trying to bust in—her whole body stiffens.

The guys are creeping me out too. I appreciate the support, but why can't they stop looking at me? Okay, the fort isn't exactly a palace, so I guess there aren't a lot of options for your attention. At least Evan and Ricky have the sense to avoid my gaze some of the time. Mitchell is just plain staring.

Having your deepest secret ripped open for the whole world to see is awful, but now I'm kind of glad it happened. Once you get over the horror and embarrassment, it's a huge relief. Keeping something like that quiet is agony—it's like you're an actor in a role, and your whole life depends on never

slipping out of character. Not only couldn't I tell my friends what Marcus was doing to me; I couldn't even say anything about the real reason he bought me new phones and game consoles and skateboards. The hardest part was keeping my mouth shut when they raved about how lucky I was to have such an amazing, generous stepdad. That was rough.

I have to admit that the guys are really coming through for me—including Ricky. They can't make my problems disappear, but just showing up means a lot. Evan has been especially great—he let me know that I'm not alone in dealing with stuff no kid should ever have to deal with. He doesn't mention his own parents, but I can tell that's what he's thinking about.

A wild notion occurs to me: How would Bennett Delamere react if he could somehow see the collection of people skulking in his bomb shelter right now? We're definitely not what he had in mind when he built this place to ride out World War III. But in another way, we're using it for exactly the purpose he designed it—to hide from an outside enemy.

There's a crash from above as the trapdoor is wrenched open. *"What is this place?"* bellows an all-too-familiar voice.

Marcus falls rather than climbs down the ladder. But he's so strong that he lands on his feet and wheels on us, his iPhone still clutched in his meaty fist. He's a huge man to begin with; in the cramped space of the fort, he looks twice the size. The guys involuntarily back up a step. They've never seen the real Marcus—the grizzly bear unleashed.

And what does he say, this monster, this apex predator who has cornered us under the ground?

"Evelyn—thank God I could track your phone! I've been worried sick!"

My insides turn to ice. I was so careful to turn off the location function on my own phone. Why didn't I think to do that on Mom's? How could I be so brainless? I've ruined us!

The apex predator pulls me into his arms as if he's just found his long-lost child. "I was afraid I'd never see you again, C.J.!"

The guys are bug-eyed. They must be wondering why we're running away from this loving husband and father.

Then I remember: They know the truth. They *believe* the truth.

I shove Marcus away with all my might. "Leave us alone!"

Marcus backs off, looking shocked. "How could you say that to me? Haven't I always been a good father to you?"

I swear—I'm so blown away by the question that I almost laugh in his face. Then I remind myself that this is Marcus—and *nothing* is funny about Marcus. I recall, in a quick-cut movie montage, every mark he ever put on me. I re-experience the impact of the blows and open-handed slaps that struck me. I feel the torque of all those times he manhandled me or twisted my arm. I relive the dread of lying in the dark, knowing what's coming. And the thought of him terrorizing my mother fills me with a rage so blind and unthinking that all I can do is fly at him, fists flailing.

In the heat of the moment, I'm too mad to realize that I have no chance against Godzilla, who could crush me like a bug. Luckily, the guys have more brains than I do. Moving almost as a unit, they catch me and pull me back from attacking my stepfather.

I struggle against them, bellowing, "Let me go!"

They hang on, keeping me from my suicide mission.

"Chill out, man!" Evan hisses into my ear.

And then, like someone flipped the channel on a TV, Marcus is a different person. The emotional family man changes behind a face that is darkening into red and eventually even purple. His eyes narrow with fury, and he seems to grow until he fills every corner of the fort, trapping us at his mercy.

My friends have never seen this version of Marcus, but Mom sure has. She jumps up and stands in front of me. "Marcus, he didn't mean it—"

He reaches out one powerful arm and sweeps her aside as easily as clearing a cobweb. It sends her sprawling, the weight of her body smashing the plexiglass cover on the turntable of the old-fashioned record player.

The roar that comes from Marcus would fill a twenty-thousand-seat arena, much less a tiny underground hideout.

"I'll make you wish you were never born . . ." he rasps, reaching for me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JASON BRAX

Janelle and I wander around the woods for half an hour before we're satisfied that it's safe to head back to the fort.

When we reach the clearing, the first thing I notice is that the trapdoor is open.

Janelle points. "Hey, shouldn't that be—"

I nod disapprovingly. "Somebody's pretty careless. I texted them that Luke and Jaeger are nosing around."

We're halfway to the entrance when the ambush comes. Luke appears from out of nowhere and takes me out with a flying tackle. Janelle's scream is cut short by Jaeger's hand over her mouth. She reaches for her phone, but he kicks it out of her grip, sending it skittering away through the underbrush.

"Janelle!" I struggle to come to her aid, but Luke is on top of me, holding me down.

Jaeger wrestles Janelle to the ground and stands over the trapdoor. "Now what have we here?"

"You can't go in there!" I bark, which might be the dumbest thing I've ever said. I'm not really thinking. All I know is the fort has been discovered and it's my fault. I've let the guys down. I wouldn't blame them if they never forgive me.

Luke gets up and looks at me with what almost seems like

regret. "It didn't have to be this way, Jason." Then the two of them disappear down the ladder.

I scramble up and look for Janelle. She's on her hands and knees, sweeping through the brush, feeling for her phone.

"Go home!" I exclaim. "You shouldn't be mixed up in this!"

I fly down the metal rungs, jumping from the halfway point and very nearly twisting both ankles at the bottom. I don't know what I expect to find, but this definitely isn't it.

The fort is so packed with people that it takes me a second or two to identify them all. I already saw Luke and Jaeger go inside. The guys are there, obviously, and C.J.'s mom. But what is his stepdad doing here?

Marcus is bellowing at the top of his lungs. All that changes, though, when he turns and spots Luke and Jaeger. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Marcus is huge and pretty scary all revved up like this. But Jaeger isn't afraid of anything or anybody. "It's a free country, old man," he says in that infuriatingly mellow voice of his. "What do *you* want?"

"His name is Jaeger Devlin," Mitchell blurts, "and he's been picking on us for weeks!"

Jaeger laughs out loud. "That's right, crybaby. Why don't you play tattletale—"

He never gets to finish the sentence, because Marcus's huge hand shoots out and closes around his throat.

Marcus turns and addresses C.J. "That true, son? Has this guy been pushing you around?"

C.J. stares at Jaeger, who has gone colorless as the powerful

grip cuts off his airway. Sure, we all hate Jaeger. But this looks really serious.

"Let him go!" C.J. says urgently.

Marcus tightens his hold on Jaeger. "No one messes with my kid! You hear that?"

"I'm not your kid!" C.J. almost wails. "I'm nothing to you!"

It only agitates Marcus even more. He lifts Jaeger off the floor and shakes him just a little. A strangled gurgling sound comes from the teenager.

We're all standing flat-footed, stricken with horror that we might be witnessing a murder.

"Marcus, please!" C.J.'s mother implores. "You have to stop!"

It's like we're frozen into a diorama, and the only living, breathing person is Jaeger. We watch, transfixed, as he reaches into his jeans and pulls out his bone-handled pocketknife. With a snap, the blade is out, glinting off the bright lighting of the fort. A split second later, the blade is gone again, buried in Marcus's ribs.

With a howl of outrage and pain, Marcus drops to the floor. Gasping for breath, Jaeger staggers back, the knife still clutched in his hand. At the sight of it, covered in blood, a wave of nausea hits me, and for a moment I'm afraid I might pass out. I bite down hard on my lip, just to bring myself back to awareness. But the crimson puddle growing around Marcus sets my vision swimming again.

Mrs. Sciutto drops to her knees and starts to cry, which only adds to the unreality of the moment.

Ricky is the first to recover. He takes out his phone and punches 9-1-1.

"Drop the phone!" Jaeger orders.

"He's bleeding!" Ricky indicates Marcus on the floor. "He needs an ambulance!"

"I said drop it!" He makes a full circle gesture with the knife. "Who's going to be the first to tell me where all the money comes from down here?"

Luke speaks up in a nervous voice. "Come on, Jaeger. The big guy looks pretty bad. Better let them call a doctor."

"I'm not leaving here without what I came for," Jaeger snaps at him.

There's something different about Jaeger now. His casual drawl is gone, and there's a hint of panic in his tone. He's already stabbed one person. And okay, that was self-defense. But if Marcus dies because we're not allowed to call for help, that'll be on Jaeger—his fault and his fault alone. It makes him even more dangerous than before, and we all sense it.

Mitchell wrenches open the kitchen drawer, comes up with a handful of blackened cutlery, and holds it out to Jaeger. "This is it! This is the stuff we were selling!"

In anger, Jaeger swipes at it with his free hand, sending knives, forks, and spoons clattering to the metal floor. "Don't show me garbage! You think I'm stupid?"

Evan steps protectively in front of Mitchell. "He's telling the truth! Those things are solid silver when you polish them!"

He takes another step forward, his chest just a few inches from the knifepoint. I grab him by the shoulders and try to

drag him back, but he shrugs me off. "Don't you get it, man?" he tells me, his voice shaking with emotion. "This is *my* fault! You think this lowlife would even know who we are if I wasn't Luke's brother?"

You can almost see the rage battling the uncertainty inside Jaeger's mind. He's outnumbered, but *he's* the one with the knife. That puts him in charge—if he's willing to use it.

The muscles in Jaeger's forearm bulge. He pulls back the knife, ready to thrust forward with all his might.

"No—" I wheeze.

A force strikes Jaeger from the side, knocking him clear of Evan. Luke takes his partner down hard, landing with his knee on Jaeger's stomach. Enraged at the betrayal, Jaeger stabs wildly up at him. Evan is the first to grab Jaeger by the arm, struggling to control the action of the knife. C.J.'s next. And when Ricky and I join in, the weapon goes tumbling across the floor. Mitchell picks it up, juggling it like it's burning his hands, and fumbles it into the chemical toilet.

Total chaos reigns. The four of us, plus Luke, are all on top of the struggling Jaeger, restraining him. Marcus is right beside us, unconscious and bleeding. Mrs. Sciutto is sobbing and dialing 9-1-1 on her phone. That's why none of us sees the first cop hit the floor at the foot of the ladder.

"Everybody freeze!"

I bet none of us has ever been so happy to be ordered around by a person in a position of authority.

In the next three seconds, there are five police officers in the fort, which means the place is pretty much packed to

capacity. Their efficiency is kind of impressive. Job one: Call an ambulance for Marcus. Next comes untangling the mass of bodies on the floor. There are a lot of babbled accusations. I have no idea how the cops make sense of any of it, but when the dust clears away, Jaeger is in handcuffs. They seem split over whether to arrest Luke too, but when C.J.'s mom explains how he saved the day, they leave him alone.

The last of the officers—the one standing by the ladder, explaining into a walkie-talkie that the EMTs are going to have to bring a stretcher into the woods—is Officer Jaworski, Janelle's father. It hits me—*that's* how we got rescued in the nick of time! Janelle must have found her phone and called her dad!

"Jason." He pockets the device and skewers me with a look. "One of these days, we're going to have a little talk about how you brought my daughter to this place."

I almost tell him, "She wouldn't stay away," because he probably knows better than anybody how hard it is to say no to Janelle. She's like a force of nature. But I don't want to risk her getting in trouble—especially since she's the one who made the call that saved all of us.

"Sure thing, Officer Jaworski."

I climb up the ladder out of the fort, and there she is, waiting for me anxiously. And in that moment, I'm really proud that she's my girlfriend. Oh, sure, the guys call me Romeo and give me a hard time about being in a relationship. But if it wasn't for Janelle, who knows how today might have gone? By the time we could have called the police and explained where

to find us, a lot of bad things could have happened. Marcus might have woken up and become violent again. Or maybe Jaeger could have convinced Luke to switch sides.

I say the first thing that comes to my mouth: "I don't know what I'd do without you!"

"Luckily, you don't have to be without me," she replies, and gives me a hug.

I actually just meant right now, when she called her dad to the fort, but she seems to be giving it a bigger meaning. I don't say anything, though. I don't want to spoil the moment.

The guys come up one at a time, along with Luke and C.J.'s mom. I catch a low *"Romeo"* from somebody, probably Mitchell. A couple of cops emerge next, escorting the handcuffed Jaeger. He doesn't meet any of our eyes as they march him away through the trees. Distant sirens indicate that the EMTs for Marcus are on the way.

Thinking back on it, I wish I'd lingered down in the fort just a few minutes longer. You know, to look around and imprint it on my memory. Because I'm suddenly overcome with the feeling that none of us are ever going to see it again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

EVAN DONNELLY

The entire clearing is surrounded by yellow-and-black police line tape. DO NOT CROSS, it says. We cross anyway. Mitchell gets tangled up in the stuff. Guess what: The trapdoor has been padlocked shut.

The official word is the town of Canaan has sealed off Bennett Delamere's bomb shelter until they can figure out who owns its contents. They also disconnected it from the power grid, which it was using illegally. That means no more lights, no more air circulation, no more old movies and music. It also means no more water, since the pump for the well ran on electricity.

The newspapers are full of articles about good old Bennett, and what an "eccentric" he must have been to create such a place.

It's Mitchell who says what we're all thinking: "Just because you're eccentric doesn't mean you can't build something really, really great."

It's weird that the fort, which was our secret for so long, is on the lips of everybody in town. You can't walk down the street without overhearing someone babbling about "Moneybags Bennett and his hole in the ground." Adults who

are old enough to remember the Cold War won't shut up about the bad old days of the arms race and duck-and-cover drills in school.

"This is exactly why we couldn't tell our parents about the fort," I remind the guys. "Adults will never let you keep anything fun."

We're all pretty bummed, but Ricky's magnet-school philosophy is the one that brings us a small amount of comfort:

"They took it away from us, but that doesn't change the fact that we had it for a while. And when we did, it was awesome."

Losing the fort isn't the only big change in our lives. For one thing, I have my brother back. Even though Jaeger is getting a pass for stabbing Marcus—self-defense—he's being charged for what he tried to do to me with that illegal knife. I'd love it if he gets sentenced to Devil's Island. But so long as it keeps him away from Luke, that suits me just fine.

Luke says I've got nothing to worry about. "The minute he pointed that knife at you, I was done with Jaeger Devlin. I should have been done with him a long time ago."

That's what I want to hear more than anything else in the world. Okay, it's just words, and our family has a lousy track record at straightening out. Look at Mom and Dad. But there are other signs that this might be a new Luke. He's stopped fighting with Grandma. He's back at high school. He *smiles* again. I have a feeling he's turning a corner.

Out of all my friends, the biggest changes are in C.J.'s life. Marcus survived his stab wound—but when he gets out of the hospital, he's going to find that his wife and stepson don't live with him anymore. Not only that, but there's a court-issued restraining order barring him from having any contact with them ever again—not so much as a phone call or a birthday card.

Since the house belongs to Marcus, C.J. and his mom are in an apartment for the time being, just outside of town. And while C.J.'s relieved and even psyched about starting over, I wouldn't describe him as overjoyed, exactly.

"I know it's weird," he admits, "but I kind of feel bad for Marcus."

"For *Marcus*?" Jason explodes. "Marcus was the monster who was putting you in the hospital!"

"And he's *huge*," Mitchell adds feelingly.

"He isn't a monster," C.J. tries to explain. "He's just messed up. But that's no excuse. Our only choice is to get him out of our lives."

Both C.J. and his mom have been talking to counselors who are helping them deal with what happened. And Mrs. Sciutto's friends and coworkers are supporting her through her life transition.

It turns out that C.J.'s new apartment is in the same building where Jason lives half the time with his dad. So C.J. already has a built-in neighbor who's a friend. They hang out most evenings and ride together to school. C.J. definitely appreciates being able to use his fancy bike for transportation, rather than

to jump over a parked car, to provide an explanation for some bruise Marcus put on him. And Jason's happy to have company out there—and that his parents have toned things down a little. The Braxes are still splitting up, but at least they've stopped using him as a weapon in the divorce wars. Inspired by C.J., he spoke to them about how hard it is to be caught between two people you love. They understood immediately.

It was Jason's first major speech since his pitch for us to clean the fort. We rehearsed it with him before he tried it on his parents. I can state with confidence that—if this was sixth-grade public speaking—he could have brought his F up to a D-minus.

When Grandma invites the guys and their parents over for dinner on Saturday, she says it's just a catching-up thing, but I'm not fooled. Bennett Delamere's bomb shelter is the biggest story to hit this town in years. And the fact that *her* grandson—me—was part of the group that discovered it has become kind of her claim to fame.

"She just wants to show off her homemade spaghetti sauce," Grandpa confides to me.

We push three card tables up to the dining room table to make room for our family, Mitchell, Jason, C.J., their moms, and the Molinas. Mitchell practically has a heart attack when he counts heads and realizes that there are thirteen of us. Luckily,

the Molinas also bring Ricky's baby sister, which makes fourteen, so the dinner is saved.

Mitchell isn't so sure. "She's got her own high chair, which is separate. There's still thirteen of us at the main table."

Mr. Molina has an idea. "I'll take the tray part off. That way, Chrissy will be eating on the same table as the rest of us, and that makes fourteen."

And Mitchell agrees. Ricky's father is pretty sharp if he can handle Mitchell when meeting him for only the first time. We've known Mitchell forever, and it usually takes us at least an hour of arguing to talk him down from a thirteen.

I'm happy to note that the guys are pretty friendly to Luke, even after all the bad blood between us. I think they understand that Jaeger was the real bad guy in that outfit.

Grandma asks us about the fort, and once she gets the ball rolling, the parents join in, peppering us with questions about our home away from home in the woods.

It's funny. We spent so much time protecting our secret, almost swallowing our tongues when there were adults around. But now that it doesn't matter anymore, it's like the dam bursts, and it comes pouring out of us.

"The trapdoor was buried till the hurricane washed the mud away . . ."

"We found the main cable that was bringing the power in . . ."

"I won gold at ladder gymnastics in the Fort Olympics . . ."

"Mitchell lost his thumb drive down the chemical toilet . . ."

"Have you ever heard of this band called the Beatles . . . ?"

"I ate a can of chili from 1981 . . ."

"Eighty-five bucks for one lousy fork . . ."

"We saw Bennett Delamere on video . . ."

"No way was *Alien* scarier than *Jaws* . . ."

We go on and on, long after the adults have run out of questions to ask us. They're looking at us pretty strangely, even Luke, who's only a few years older than we are.

They don't get it. They're not supposed to get it. They weren't there.

What do they know about how special it is—how *rare*—for a kid to have a place that's totally yours? And no matter what else is going on in your life—a divorce, a horrible stepfather, moving to a new town, school problems, or your parents abandoning you—you still have this thing, this place that's your escape from it.

Until they take it away from you.

Maybe we all think about that last part, because after so much enthusiasm, the five of us get really quiet at the same time. That's what it would take to shut us up—the idea of what we've lost.

Grandma and Grandpa break the melancholy silence by serving dinner. Never before has anybody seen so much spaghetti and meat sauce all in one place. The serving bowl itself is about the size of the fort. Grandma doesn't believe in her guests going away hungry.

It's great—I mean really great. But I'd trade it all for one

more tin of forty-year-old baked beans. I don't know what the other guys are thinking. Maybe it's just me.

Chrissy drops her bottle with a thump. She's too little for solid food. I wonder if Mitchell realizes that means that thirteen of us are having the spaghetti. Better not mention it.

Mrs. Brax takes one bite, and her eyes pop open in surprise. "Your sauce is delicious! I don't think I've ever tasted anything quite like it before! You have to give us your recipe!"

"Please don't tell us it's an old family secret," Mr. Molina chimes in. "This is incredible!"

Grandma beams with pride. "There's no big secret except the spices. My friend Ed Breckinridge grows a special organic garden, and I get all my herbs from him."

Six forks hit the table with a clatter.

"Ed Breckinridge?" Mitchell repeats in a strangled voice. "You mean *Dr.* Breckinridge?"

"Best herb garden in the city," Grandma confirms. "I don't know how he does it, but he always manages to get that extra little bit of *zing* into the flavor."

A mouthful of pasta turns to acid on my tongue. I think about Mitchell "watering" that herb garden in his own special way, every night for months. I can't spit out my food—I'm sitting right across from the baby. And even if I wasn't, who would it be acceptable to spit it on?

I check out the guys around the table. Jason manufactures a sneeze and deposits the contents of his mouth into his napkin. C.J. won't go that far, but he manages to tuck his pasta

into one cheek for disposal at a future time. Ricky is the bravest of all. He swallows—but he sure doesn't seem happy about it.

Luke grins at us. "All right, you guys. Man up and confess."

Grandpa is confused. "Confess what?"

"Come on, Mitchell," Luke prods. "Let's have it. If you don't tell them, I will."

Mitchell is practically green in the face as he guzzles from his water glass. "The thing is," he mumbles when he comes up for air, "we can't eat the spaghetti."

"Whyever not?" Grandma demands.

Mitchell's head is practically in his lap. "Because I ruined it." His voice reedy, he tells the story of his nightly revenge trips to "water his plants."

The adults listen in amazement for a few moments, and then laughter rocks the dining room. Even Chrissy joins in, although obviously she doesn't understand what she's laughing at.

Mitchell is outraged. "What's so funny?"

Grandma explains how the ingredients in our food are all carefully washed, and that the spaghetti sauce is one hundred percent Mitchell-free. To prove her point, she takes a forkful of pasta and swallows with gusto. The other adults join in.

The guys look semi-relieved, especially Mitchell.

Mrs. Worth is horrified. "Mitchell, why would you do such a terrible thing to Dr. Breckinridge?"

"I'm not terrible," Mitchell retorts. "*He's* terrible."

"But he was always so good to you."

"He dropped me as a patient the minute we lost our health insurance."

"But he had no idea about that!" she protests.

Mitchell just stares at her.

"When I lost my job at DelaCraft, I stopped making your appointments because I knew I couldn't pay for them," his mother explains. "He didn't drop us. We dropped him."

With a stricken expression, Mitchell looks around the table, to find everyone engrossed in his private business. Then he plunges a fork into his dinner.

"I'm starving! Last one finished is a rotten egg!"

MITCHELL WORTH

The town council votes to salvage whatever Delamere family valuables they can get out of the fort. The fort itself—which they have the nerve to call "the hole in the ground"—gets filled with sand and permanently sealed. So much for the greatest place a bunch of guys ever got to call their own. I'll bet they think that's the right thing to do. They're probably breaking their arms patting themselves on the back, because they eliminated a safety hazard. Idiots.

The guys are pretty upset, and who can blame us? Ricky said he practically cried when he saw the work crew heading into the woods. Ricky's one of us now. You know that new magnet school the guy wanted to go to? Well, he aced the test to get in, and then told them to forget it. He wants to stay in school with his friends. That's *us*, by the way—even me. And if that seems like a dumb decision, remember that Ricky's the one who made it, and he's smart.

But back to the fort—the *ex*-fort. Ricky's bummed, Evan's bummed, Jason's bummed, C.J.'s bummed, and so am I. The whole thing is a humongous bum-fest. All those days when we got out of school and made a beeline for the woods—that's ancient history.

Janelle tells us we should look for another fort. Not even Jason thinks that's a good idea. There can only ever be one fort.

I'd be willing to carry a broken mirror under thirteen ladders while a black cat crosses my path if we could have the fort again. Okay, maybe not, because what's the point of having a fort if you're dead? But you know what I mean.

Like all that's not bad enough, Mom forces me to call Dr. Breckinridge to apologize for what I did to his herb garden. It's not a very fun conversation. But he backs up what Mom said—he never dropped me as a patient.

"Then I guess I dropped myself," I tell him. "I'm always doing stupid things. I make bad decisions because of my OCD. You explained that to me."

"Yes, I suppose I did," he replies. There's a long silence on the other end of the line. Then: "How'd you like to come back into therapy with me?"

"I really would." I'm not lying, even though those therapy sessions could be kind of boring. "But we lost our insurance and my mom can't pay."

So he makes me an offer. I'll start seeing him again, and instead of payment, I'll work it off with odd jobs.

"That would be great!" I exclaim. "Only—what odd jobs? I'm not good at anything."

"Of course you are. For starters, you can take care of my herb garden. It needs to be cultivated and weeded. And watered, of course—with real water this time."

"I'll bet his herbs are lousy from now on," C.J. comments. "*You* were the special sauce."

"Don't even joke about that," Ricky says seriously. "We all *ate* those herbs."

It's after one a.m. and the five of us are slinking through the darkened streets for one final fort mission. We're not going *to* the fort—there's no such place anymore. It's all filled in and sealed up.

No, we're on our way to the Canaan Municipal Dump. The city took the contents of the fort that nobody wanted and tossed it all away like it was garbage. I guess it *is* garbage if nobody wants it. But it'll never be garbage to us. And this is our last chance to visit the fort—what's left of it, anyway. And maybe our *only* chance to say goodbye.

"How much farther?" I ask. I'm having visions of rats the size of SUVs running around the dump. Probably in groups of thirteen.

"We're close," Jason replies. "Can't you smell it?"

"I'm a mouth breather," I explain. "It's not my fault. It's medical."

By the light of five cell phones, the dump is a terrible sight. First of all, it's huge, so how are we ever going to find what we're looking for? Plus it's gross. I don't see any rats, which means they must be hiding. I hope they're just as scared of me as I am of them. (That would be pretty hard, though.)

Ricky gets the idea to start searching near where the

sanitation trucks are parked. "That's probably where the freshest stuff is," he explains.

C.J. sniffs. "If it's fresh you're looking for, you've come to the wrong place."

Two burning-red eyes stare at us from the top of the pile.

"A rat!" I exclaim in horror.

"What did you expect to find at a dump?" Jason booms. "A cocker spaniel?"

We're both wrong. A fat raccoon backs away, glaring at us defiantly.

As usual, Ricky's instincts turn out to be pretty sharp. We haven't been looking very long when C.J. spots the couch silhouetted against the moon atop a trash heap. He should know. For the longest time, that was his bed.

Climbing on green bags like they're stepping-stones, we manage to haul each other up. We pan our phone lights over the pile. It's all there—pieces of the fort. The record player; the videocassette machine; the TV where we first watched Bennett Delamere speak the words, *If you're watching this, I have to conclude that I'm dead, and America is under attack.*

Evan reaches down and comes up with an ancient can of SpaghettiOs.

"I'm not going to miss that," C.J. admits. "But it tasted pretty good in the moment."

Jason displays a copy of Queen's *A Night at the Opera* album, clearing half a banana peel off the cardboard sleeve. The vinyl record slides out, broken into three pieces.

I spy the *Jaws* videocassette at my sneakers, also smashed. "I wanted to watch it once more," I say ruefully.

"Why?" C.J. challenges. "You weren't scared enough the first five times?"

"Because *this* time it was going to be okay!" I insist.

They all laugh in my face.

"Well, we'll never know *now*," I conclude ruefully.

"I don't see your PlayStation," Evan tells C.J. "I'll bet somebody took it."

"They can have it," C.J. replies, tight-lipped.

We all understand. It was a gift from Marcus, and that's a part of C.J.'s life that he'd rather forget.

We hang out a little longer, sifting through movies and music we loved, but nobody takes any souvenirs. Most of it's busted anyway. And besides, none of us owns the right equipment to play it on.

We find the chemical toilet last. Sitting on top of the closed lid is a shape none of us recognize. Five phone lights shine on Jason's cactus, the one he rescued from his parents' crumbling marriage.

We goggle.

The cereus cactus is in full bloom. A brilliant white flower glows in the middle of all this garbage and decay, the castoffs of our entire town.

"No way!" Ricky exclaims. "That thing only blooms once a year, in the middle of the night! What are the mathematical odds that it would happen right now?"

I may be the last kid anybody would ever let into a magnet school, but I think I have the answer. "It has nothing to do with math," I assure him. "We came here to say goodbye to the fort. This is the fort saying goodbye to us."

For once, nobody laughs at me.

RESOURCES

The characters in *The Fort* are dealing with a number of hard situations, and they learn that it is always better to share the burden rather than carry it alone, especially if you feel it is weighing you down.

It is important for survivors of abuse like C.J. to talk about what has happened or is happening to them. In C.J.'s case, he talks to his friends. But there are many other options: relatives not involved in the abuse, therapists, guidance counselors, trusted teachers, or another adult deserving of trust, like a coach or a friend's parent. If you don't want to speak to anyone who is already in your life and want to talk to a trained professional, you can contact Childhelp at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) and childhelphotline.org or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Both are available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Whatever you are up against, you are not alone.

If you would like to know more about obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), two resources can be found at kids.iocdf.org/for-kids/ocd-at-school/ and cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth

/ocd.html. As Mitchell discovers, getting professional care for OCD is important. Not all cases of OCD are like Mitchell's—there are many kinds of OCD, all of which need their own forms of treatment, making it a condition that kids and adults can live with comfortably.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1976, when I was in seventh grade, our English teacher informed us that we were each going to "write a novel."

He was actually the track and field coach. Thanks to staff cutbacks and a couple of maternity leaves, he turned out to be the only adult available to cover our class that hour. We resented the novel project, and we resented him for coming up with it. The best word I can think of to describe the mood in our classroom was *mutiny*.

That project changed my life.

The result was a story called *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall!* At the end of the term, when our class began swapping projects and doing book reports on each other's work, it became an instant favorite. "This is better than anything they've got in the library," one kid told me. That's still the best review I've ever received.

When I decided to see if I could get my book published, I immediately thought of Scholastic. I was the class monitor for Scholastic Book Orders—which practically made me an employee . . . *and* keeper of the bonus points.

In 1978, when I was a freshman in high school, Scholastic published my very first book. That was ninety-nine books ago.

The one you're holding in your hand right now is Book 100—also from Scholastic.

I never set out to launch a publishing career. My main goal, back in 1976, was to avoid flunking seventh-grade English. I definitely never anticipated Book 100. I'm kind of shocked to be there now.

The future has a way of reaching out and pointing you in the right direction. You never know what it's going to look like. Sometimes it looks like a track and field coach who has to come up with a creative writing assignment on the fly while he's running the thirteen miles to work.

It blows me away that, decades later, that seventh-grade novel project hasn't ended for me. These days, the fans of my early books have kids of their own, who have turned into fans too. The fact that generations of readers continue to let my stories and characters into their lives is the greatest honor I ever could have hoped for.

You're the reason I'm still doing what I was surprised to find out I was good at all those years ago. This has always been a partnership—me writing books and you reading them, thinking about them, laughing in all the right places.

I hope you enjoy *The Fort*. Thank you for being a reader. I promise to check back in when Book 200 comes out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GORDON KORMAN is the acclaimed author of such modern classics as *Restart, Slacker, War Stories*, and *Linked*. His first novel, *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall!*, was written when he was thirteen. *The Fort* is his hundredth book.

WHAT IF YOU FOUND A PLACE THAT NOBODY ELSE KNEW ABOUT?

The morning after Hurricane Leo rips through their town, Evan, Jason, Mitchell, and C.J. find a total mess outside, with downed branches and uprooted trees everywhere. They know they should stay indoors—but they want to go exploring, even if it means having a new kid, Ricky, tag along.

Ricky's the first one to discover a strange trapdoor in the middle of the woods—the door to an old bomb shelter, unearthed by the hurricane. Inside, the boys find a completely intact underground lair, with electricity, food, and even a TV. The boys vow to keep the place a secret. It's theirs now.

But some secrets are hard to keep . . . especially when adults and older kids are closing in. And what started out as a fun place to escape soon becomes a serious refuge for one of the boys, who is trying to avoid his abusive stepfather. The Fort has become the safest place they have—will they be able to protect it?

MIDDLE GRADE
Ages 8 through 12

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